

The Leviathan of the Covenant

盟約の リヴァイアサン

文月城
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IV



盟血約のリヴァイアサン

IV

丈月城

Takeduki
Joe

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たしかに蛇にも長虫にも

酷似した感触で

かねすねどうもき

あらこら這いまわっている

露天風呂のなかを口の大蛇が

何匹も這いずり回っていた

皆、大蛇ではない

しかし、こいつのは蛇ではない

触手だった。何十本もの触手が

露天風呂のなかをうごめき

這いまわっているのだ



Chapter 1 - For that Inevitable Day in the Future

Part 1

"Senpai, it's already morning, you know? Time to get up."

An adorable voice called to him, quite an excellent match for the refreshing morning.

It was the voice of Shirasaka Hazumi, the unique underclassman of Haruga Haruomi aka Hal. Her cute voice stimulated his auditory senses, rousing Hal's consciousness gradually from slumber.

But in the end, he still wanted to say those cliched words.

"Hmm... Please, give me five more minutes..."

"Not allowed. You'll be late if you don't rise from bed and get prepared."

Even without a prior agreement, Hazumi was waking him gently as though upholding a promise.

What a perfect underaged bride. No, what she was achieving in the "childhood friend character" realm was perhaps transcendence beyond perfection... While refusing to get up, Hal was struck by a sudden impact of bliss, instantly opening his eyes.

Perhaps interacting with Hazumi had caused some kind of secretion in his brain matter.

But this was only natural—As soon as he opened his eyes, he was greeted with an innocent smiling face by his pillow that caused him to believe so.

"Fufufu. Good morning, Senpai."

"Yeah, mornin'. I'm sorry you have to go to all this trouble to wake me up."

"Of course not. Since I am your assistant, Senpai, this trivial task is more than warranted."

Lying on the bed under the thin blanket, Hal was having this morning conversation with Hazumi.

Sunlight streaming in through the window was illuminating Hal's

bedroom. However, there was an even brighter light source in the room—namely, Hazumi's angelic smile.

Beaming tenderly, the girl was exhibiting purity that was even more dazzling than sunlight to Hal.

"Starting tomorrow, just go with a morning call by cellphone, okay?"

"Yes. But if time permits... May I still intrude?"

"Of course."

Confronted with Hazumi's polite request for indulgence, Hal replied without thinking.

The pure-minded junior student nodded happily, even though the unreliable upperclassman—Haruga Haruomi—was supposed to be the one expressing gratitude no matter how you thought about it.

Once again, Hal found his heart filled up with bliss.

If life continued with Hazumi waking him up every morning, his body might suffer from side effects of excessive happiness, perhaps even leading to an early demise just like that.



Just as Hal was indulging in his delusions, Hazumi exited the room.

She was probably expecting Hal to get dressed next. Hence, he removed his pajamas decisively and put on his school uniform while reviewing all kinds of recent events in his mind.

Almost a month had passed since Princess Yukikaze's invasion.

It was now July after final exams and the students of the Academy were waiting for the summer vacation. During this period, Haruga Haruomi regressed into an oversleeper.

Perhaps it was an aftereffect of the various commotions in June.

Sacrificing sleep to investigate clues, encountering Princess Yukikaze and the ensuing battles, establishing a new covenant with Hinokagutsuchi, defeating True Genbu-Ou and handling all kinds of aftermath business...

Now that he was finally done with all this, Hal's wake up time had been postponed greatly.

Still soundly asleep at 8 or 9am, he remained in bed in spite of the ringing alarm clock.

Overexhaustion—especially a severe case of accumulated mental fatigue—was Hal's self-diagnosis.

Speaking of Haruga Haruomi, naturally, he was not the kind of person to put in any effort towards rising early.

Instead, he had forged a document, intending to submit to the school a diagnosis report of primary hypersomnia so that he could sleep as much as he wanted.

What foiled this plan was Hazumi's comment after hearing about it.

"In that case, Senpai, let me be responsible for waking you up every morning from now on!"

And this morning was the first occasion.

After getting dressed, Hal went to the living room to meet up with Hazumi.

"Fufufufu. You won't be late to school today as long as you leave the house at this time."

"Yeah, then let's set off quickly," answered Hal to Hazumi who was likewise dressed in Kogetsu Academy's uniform.

Then he reached for the table in the living room and grabbed a silver-colored pack of energy jelly and a chocolate bar just enough to fill his stomach.

Even if one was about to be late, it would be too illogical to head off to school with a piece of toast in one's mouth to stave off hunger—

Hence, the food laid out here was what Hal had purchased in

advance according to this judgment. Not only were these items good enough to handle a competitive cyclist's daily requirement of five or six thousand calories, but they could also be consumed while on the move.

However, Hal's logical breakfast choice was overruled.

"Oh Senpai, if it's okay with you, could you leave the food there?"

"Sure, but why?"

"Fufufu. It's a secret."

Now that Hazumi had displayed such a smile, Hal had no choice but to comply obediently.

He returned the food to the table then picked up his schoolbag. Then exiting the entrance of the Haruga residence, known locally as a haunted house, he set off for school.

The first part of the journey was a walk to the nearest station—Narihirabashi.

Taking the New Town Loop Line, they got off two stations later at Ryougoku.

Then walking on foot from Ryougoku Station, they would reach Kogetsu Academy. As a side note, one would need to continue three stations down the line in order to reach Monzennamachi, the closest station to Hazumi and Juujouji Orihime's homes.

The underclassman had gotten up early on purpose to visit Hal's home in the morning.

"Hmm, you're such a cute underclassman, Shirasaka."

"P-Please don't make such a weird comment so suddenly."

While conversing, the two of them went through Ryougoku Station's turnstile. Their friend was already waiting for them nearby in uniform.

A female student with a head of long and beautiful hair. This was precisely Juujouji Orihime.

Dressed in the short-sleeved summer uniform, Orihime was plenty striking even amid the crowded train station.

"Good morning, Haruga-kun. It would seem that letting Hazumi go out of her way to pick you up has been highly effective."

Orihime spoke while waving to her cousin Hazumi.

Then from a tote bag she was carrying in addition to her schoolbag, she took out a cylindrical package, roughly twenty-five centimeters in length.

The wrapping paper featured patterns emulating English newsprint.

After handing the package to Hal, Orihime used her gaze to urge him to open it.

"Don't tell me this is my breakfast?"

"Indeed it is. As agreed previously. I also prepared Hazumi's portion too."

"Fufu. Thank you, Nee-sama!"

Hal opened the package to find a submarine sandwich.

A small piece of French bread had been sliced through the middle to put in a filling of ham, bacon, cheese, lettuce, diced pimento, tomato slices, olives, etc.

In addition to Hal, Orihime handed an identical package to Hazumi and smiled.

"Since Hazumi said she was getting up early to go your house, Haruga-kun, I suggested I would prepared breakfast."

"Such care and consideration really puts me to shame."

"You have been working extremely hard recently, Haruga-kun. This bit of reward is nothing in comparison. Besides—"

Orihime winked suggestively.

"It seems that you are still preparing something, but please don't let your sleep deprivation get out of hand."

"....."

"If you continue to act with imprudence, Hazumi and I will have to impose ourselves on your hospitality. To stop you from burning the

midnight oil, we will supervise you every night."

"I will commit these gratifying words to memory."

"More than committing to memory, you must put words into action properly. Sleep deprivation will reduce work efficiency instead. Didn't you say that?"

"Well, that's true..."

Unless there was a true emergency, staying up all night for days in a row was definitely more harm than good.

Speaking of which, Hal's nature was a bit lazy to begin with. Consequently, he wholeheartedly agreed with this enthusiastically helpful classmate. While chatting about this topic, the trio made their way towards Kogetsu Academy.

A peaceful morning commute.

Apart from Hal, Hazumi and Orihime, many other students were walking along the same route.

However, compared to a month earlier, student numbers were definitely lower from Hal's impression. This was not baseless speculation.

Currently, Kogetsu Academy's overall enrollment had gone down by roughly 10%.

In the twenty-first century, humans were threatened by "Dragon Strikes."

However, the initial attacks did not happen too frequently. Even if one were to use the islands of Japan as a reference area, it was only two or three Raptor attacks a year.

But recently, Kantou region had become extremely anomalous—Tokyo in particular.

Ever since early spring, dragons kept showing up frequently. Raak Al Soth, Pavel Galad, Ra Exhos, together with the large numbers of Raptors summoned by them, and even Genbu-Ou and Princess Yukikaze...

The ordinary populace was not privy to the details of the attacks.

This was due to the Japanese government imposing information control. Information regarding elite dragons, dragon kings and leviathans was generally undisclosed. This was no exception.

But conceivably, the populace would gradually start feeling wary of the excessively anomalous increase in dragon appearances.

It was at this juncture that the New Town Occupation incident happened in June. Triggered by this, people assessing whether they should move away from the Tokyo area were not in the minority, rather, one should say they were the majority.

With the advent of early July now, residents committed to moving to other regions were rapidly surfacing.

"As long as the dragon princess remains stationed at Old Tokyo, perhaps it might not be a bad idea to simply evacuate the residents of New Town and western Tokyo completely," Hal remarked while walking along a corridor in the high school division.

A student in the middle school division, Hazumi had parted ways from them earlier. Hal was walking alone with Orihime now.

"Sure enough, even more battles are coming than ever before?"

"Well, it could be the opposite too."

"The opposite?"

Hal and Orihime chatted while they arrived in front of the classroom's door.

They both belonged to Year 1 Class F. The master mage who used to be active in Europe, Asya—Anastasya Rubashvili—was also in the same class.

"Good morning, Orihime-san. Good morning to you too, Harry. You finally came to school properly today."

Another master mage was already waiting in front of the classroom.

Luna Francois Gregory.

Born in America's Oklahoma State, she was the talented lady whose control of the leviathan, Glinda the "Good Witch of the South," made her the Trans-Pacific Shootdown Ace.

The blonde girl with doll-like beauty was dressed in the school's summer uniform.

"Good morning, Luna-san. What business brings you to a first-year homeroom?"

"Having tidied up the proposal and reference materials, I merely intend to deliver them to Harry," replied Luna Francois to Orihime's question.

Transferred into Kogetsu Academy last month, she was wearing the school badge for second-years on the collar of her uniform. In fact, she was a year older than Hal and the others.

Incidentally, the two girls were simply conversing in the corridor.

But that alone was enough to gather the gazes of passing students. Like Orihime, Luna Francois was an equally striking presence too.

All things considered, she was a blonde Caucasian beauty seldom seen in Japanese high schools.

Besides, for a transfer student to arrive gracefully given the current situation, this attracted even more gossip and speculation than Orihime.

"So Harry, this is the first step to our ambition."

Luna Francois handed over a thick A4-size envelop.

Inside was a stack of printed documents. Hal expected the competent and meticulous Luna to have already sent an electronic copy to his email. He nodded deeply.

"How efficient. It's only been a week since I asked you."

"In any case, here is the first stage. Afterwards, I shall be reading the Japanese comic you lent me as a reference, Harry, while gradually advancing the plan."

"How reliable."

"Haruga-kun, what did you lend to Luna-san?"

"I don't know if you've heard of it, but it's called *The Kingdom of Ambition*."

"...What is that?"

"A manga from decades ago. It's a story about two Tokyo University students who started their careers in a yakuza gang in order to realize their ambition of conquering Japan through violence. In the past, it was only after reading this manga that I figured things out—the process of how to control others and ways to grab power."

"This story shall surely serve as our bible for we are fated to discern the mechanisms of society's power hierarchy, realizing our ambition at the end of conflict to welcome a new dawn."

"...Haruga-kun and Luna-san, do you have some kind of ambition?"

"Well, it's nothing amazing if I really had to say it."

"One could consider it as something a step away from ambition, perhaps a blueprint for tomorrow or a plan for the future?"

"Summing up, you two are up to some kind of prank—Is that what you mean?"

Getting a vague sense of the truth, Orihime smiled wryly and shrugged.

Haruga Haruomi was in the first year of high school. As a member of the research organization SAURU, he had been traveling all over the world to recover Grave Goods and was responsible for forging covenants between witches and leviathans.

And now, Hal had become the only human in possession of a dragonslaying rune.

Currently, he was feeling his way around to see how he could make effective use of this new skill, to build a new career.

Orihime was lending her assistance as a friend. In addition, Hazumi and Luna Francois were also reliable helpers. With the addition of his childhood friend Asya and that lazy former dragon, Hinokagutsuchi—

All this was still not enough.

"As the first step towards realizing ambition, shouldn't I hire a few more people? At an hourly wage of 1200 yen, I suppose."

Despite the absurdity of his words, Hal's mutterings sounded quite

leisurely in tone.

Part 2

There were still fifteen minutes before morning homeroom.

It was currently early July with finals already over, leaving only the end-of-term ceremony and summer vacation ahead. Consequently, Year 1 Class F was filled with a lethargic atmosphere. Hal's classmates were chatting, passing manga around, playing with cellphones and even napping this early in the morning.

However, Asya was not present. Hal muttered quietly, "Maybe she's having breakfast at a fast food joint or beef bowl shop somewhere?"

"I also prepared the same breakfast for Asya-san as for you... I guess it will have to become a break time snack."

"There's also the option of secretly eating it during class."

While talking to Orihime, Hal went to sit down.

His seat was located in the last row next to the window with Juujouji Orihime seated on his right. Thinking about it now, compared to their first conversation in early spring, Hal realized that the situation had changed completely...

While reminiscing poignantly, Hal searched his schoolbag.

Then he took out two packs of cafe au lait that he had bought at a vending machine earlier.

"This is a return gift for breakfast."

"You're very welcome. Then I'll graciously accept your gift."

After accepting the cafe au lait, Orihime smiled mischievously.

Hal could not help but feel his heart pounding at the sight of her smile. Recently, although he did not know why, this rise in heart rate had been commonplace whenever he spent time with the cheerful, considerate and understanding Juujouji Orihime with her topnotch beauty and talent, outstanding figure and boundless initiative.

It was the same right now. Although this heart racing phenomenon

left him completely baffled, he did not find it uncomfortable at all.

Still with his heart rate elevated, Hal took out the breakfast Orihime had prepared for him.

"Then I'm digging in."

"Yes, please enjoy... How's the taste?"

"Mmm. It's just as tasty as a normal BLT. Thanks."

"What a perfunctory comment as usual."

"Or perhaps to express my maximum gratitude for your personal cooking, how about I perform a prostration rite? I learned the formal method in Tibet before."

Hal began to recall his childhood memories.

"First put the palms together then raise them overhead. Then hit the ground as though performing a head sliding maneuver in baseball. It makes even more of an impact if the forehead strikes the ground spectacularly with bleeding."

"It's fine. You don't have to go that far."

Orihime smiled lightly while she spoke.

"I'll still prepare breakfast for you next time even without bloodshed. Although you won't end up starving, Haruga-kun, if I leave you alone, you certainly won't eat three meals normally."

"I'd rather you call it a lifestyle prioritizing efficiency... Eh?"

At this moment, Hal noticed. Several classmates nearby had pushed their chairs back in succession, stood up in a clatter and left their seats in a hurry.

The first to move was Takayama, the male student sitting in front of Hal.

The five or six classmates to get up next were also boys. Some of them walked to the blackboard while others left the classroom directly, distancing themselves from Hal and Orihime rapidly.

And for some reason, all of them kept clicking their tongue, their faces filled with anger and frustration...

"I wonder what's the matter with them?"

"Now that you mention it, I think something similar happened before. What the heck is going on?"

Orihime tilted her head in puzzlement and Hal fell silent too.

But before the answer surfaced, a certain girl burst out laughing "ahaha."

"Oh my, it's because the mood between you two was perfect—"

"Seeing the ever popular Juujouji-san getting lovey dovey with a boy next to them, of course they're going to be mad."

" "Lovey dovey?" "

The bearers of this shocking news to Hal and Orihime were two girls in the same class. One was the short-haired Mutou-san who sat in front of Orihime while the other was the twintailed Funaki-san adjacent to her.

Their full names were Mutou Natsumi and Funaki Kyouka respectively.

Due to the opportunity created by the June incident, Hal had gotten much closer to them than before.

"Really? So like before, everyone still thinks I'm going out with Juujouji."

Hal nodded with a sigh.

"It's really been too busy lately, so much I completely forgot this... The rumors still haven't fizzed out? It should be more interesting to follow gossip news on celebrities than us, right?"

"I thought it would last no more than seventy-five days. What unexpected longevity..."

"Because you two keep adding new fuel regularly."

In response to Orihime's puzzled countenance, Funaki-san offered her opinion, apparently knowledgeable of the reason. She was not only a classroom gossip enthusiast but also very informed and connected.

"Listen to what I heard—This morning, Juujouji-san proposed a plan about living at Haruga-kun's home, isn't that right?"

"Th-That isn't a plan, I was just bringing it up as a possibility!"

"In terms of scandal, there's no difference between the two—"

"Even when it was clearly just a joke?!"

Funaki-san's viewpoint brought shock to the unexpectedly careless school idol.

It looked like Juujouji Orihime had dug her own grave again. That being said, she deserved pity for the fact that a throwaway comment on the way to school had been overheard by nearby students.

Meanwhile, fellow UFO Research Club member Mutou-san spoke up and asked Hal, "Can I ask a question? But I'm directing this at Haruga-sensei, the expert in *that* field, rather than Haruga-kun the classmate."

"Sure, but do note that my three sizes are top secret, okay?"

"No problem. I'd use forceful measures if I wanted your three sizes. Putting that aside, this is an unfounded worry from the Mutou family's pair of slightly happy-go-lucky parents—Something about whether this Tokyo New Town is actually still livable despite the recent surge in incidents."

Originally smiling, Mutou-san gradually suppressed her expression and lowered her voice.

Indeed—The Tokyo Occupation incident had happened in June.

Back then, Mutou and Funaki had escaped the "cold sleep" curse and consequently witnessed the silver dragon Pavel Galad's "transformation" as well as the scene of Orihime and Asya summoning "serpents" as witches.

After that, Hal had partially disclosed the situation to the two girls on his own accord.

(But since the truth related to Hal's identity as a dragonslayer was a hassle, he had omitted it.)

Her inquiry was being made in consideration of Haruga Haruomi's

status as an "expert" in that field.

The adjacent Orihime turned to look at Hal in interest. The talkative Funaki-san also quieted down with eyes of anticipation. Everyone was waiting for Hal's answer.

"Good question. I've mentioned it a bit before, lately several dragons have launched invasions in a contest to rule over the Tokyo area... This counts as the truth, I guess."

After thinking briefly, Hal continued, "Of course, it's possible that Tokyo might be attacked again by new dragons. However, Tokyo and its vicinity is currently the turf of someone considered quite powerful, even among the dragons. Depending on the situation, it might become more peaceful than before, actually."

Last month, Old Tokyo's "wedge" had fallen into the white dragon king's hands.

Princess Yukikaze. The bearer of the Rune of the Arrow, an adorable yet violent conqueror.

"Did you know? You can say that Dragon Strikes never happen in the New York area—the sphere of influence belonging to Red Hannibal, the representative of dragonkind."

"Hannibal... You mean the King of Dragons that appeared in July 1999!"

"That's him alright. Presumably, low-ranked dragons fear Hannibal, which is why they don't enter his territory lightly."

"Perhaps the same situation might happen in Tokyo—Is that what you mean, Haruga-kun?"

Impressive as always, the UFO Research Club's upcoming ace, one might say?

Mutou-san was able to put two and two together despite Hal's crude explanation. Orihime and Funaki-san both looked at her with impressed expressions.

"Of course, I can't promise you 100%. After all, dragons could descend from the sky no matter where on Earth you go," added Hal somewhat helplessly.

"If you look back in a few years' time—You might end up concluding it was safer to stay in Tokyo in the first place. So whether staying behind or moving away immediately, either's fine. Given the current situation, that's all I can say."

In fact, Hal had given the same explanation to Orihime not too long ago.

No sooner had Hal finished than Mutou-san nodded firmly.

"Since there's no way to reach an immediate conclusion, you might as well wait and see a bit longer huh..."

"Well, it's only my personal opinion. Depending on how the situation changes, you should make preparations to move any moment."

Hal reached into his schoolbag and took out his cellphone.

"By the way, my answer is 'okay' for what you requested of me earlier, with conditions attached. Regarding the 'serpents'—what we call leviathans in technical jargon—used to intercept unruly dragons, which you wanted to learn about in detail."

"Eh? Really?"

"Yes. As long as you agree, Mutou-san, I will send the file of this compilation, titled *The Artificial Lifeform Known as the Leviathan and the Ultimate Truth of the World, an Introduction,* to your cellphone and computer."

"...How thoughtful. So what conditions do you intend to propose?"

Hearing Hal's suggestion, Mutou-san smiled malevolently.

"Haruga-san, you guys belong to an organization named SAURU, right? Are you asking me to join this secret association too? Or will you threaten me with men in black who'll abduct me if I leak this secret?"

"The exact opposite, Mutou-san. Do you want to work at my private firm?"

An hourly wage of 1200 yen for now, with additional hazard pay.

Of course, there was a nondisclosure clause whose violation would bring legal and magical retribution, but with it came the chance to

fully learn so-called "world secrets." *This did not rule out the possibility of aiding in future publications of knowledge obtained as a result.*

With the atmosphere of a chat taking place in a classroom, Hal explained these conditions.

Since there were no boys nearby, only Orihime, Mutou-san and Funaki-san, this was a very promising recruitment.

The sudden proposal took Orihime and Mutou-san aback in surprise.

Meanwhile, the third girl present, Funaki-san, raised her hand with frightening vigor.

"Y-Yes yes! I want to apply for this job too! Hiring a high school girl for an hourly wage of 1200 yen is very generous. It's only around 800 at most for other places!"

"I happen to need a few helpers to aid in keeping details organized, so your help is very welcomed."

"Awesome!"

"H-Haruga-kun, are you really certain?"

"Don't worry, Juujouji. Since a while ago, I've intended to hire personnel to a certain extent."

Hal nodded readily at Orihime's confirmation.

Hence, the first recruitment target—Mutou-san—also raised a question.

"S-Since you're recruiting me, I suppose you also plan on inviting the other members of the UFO Research Club?"

"Yeah. The only male member apart from me is Sakuraba-senpai, right? I'd like to rope him in too. President M goes without saying, but she isn't really the employee type. I might as well put up all the capital and have her in charge of an entire shop."

Hal remarked enthusiastically in front of the three girls.

"Depending on the line of business, sales figures might turn out to be quite astounding."

"True, if she were to run a life coaching consultancy, business will definitely be booming... "

"A small tavern or bar might be a good fit... Although the president is still a minor despite appearances."

After Orihime and Mutou-san expressed agreement, the warning bell for class immediately rang.

Homeroom would start in five minutes. Orihime looked around the classroom.

"Asya-san is still not here. Is she oversleeping on Haruga-kun's behalf?"

"Oh, you guys didn't know? Lately, she's been coming to school early, looking like she's plenty busy. I saw her this morning too."

Funaki-san the gossip-lover told the two of them readily.

This was news not only to Orihime but Hal too.

"What is she doing so early in the morning at school?"

"Practice—No, I think she called it special training. It looks like she'll be late to class today, I guess?"

"Special training!?"

The unexpected description made Hal widen his eyes.

Part 3

"A-Amenbo akai na aiueo! Kitsutsuki kotsu kotsu kare keya ki! Tote tote tatta to tobitatta! Namekuji noro noro naninuneno!"

This was happening an hour prior to Haruga Haruomi and Juujouji Orihime arriving at the classroom.

Today, Asya—namely, Anastasya Rubashvili—was dedicating herself to vocal exercises again. This was a basic lesson familiar to people in theater troupes and drama clubs.

Naturally, a certain person remained standing on the side with arms crossed—

"Enunciate your words more... Sigh, but let's conclude here this morning."

With an estimated bodyweight of 140kg, President M commented gravely.

She was dressed in a plain white t-shirt with a white toga like those of ancient Roman sages. This type of ancient attire could only be seen nowadays in movies about gladiators or bath houses set in that particular era.

Producing an effect akin to cosplay, President M had ample presence today too.

Inside the forest on campus, the two of them were having a one-to-one special training session.

"After calisthenics and vocal exercises, read out the script as usual. Ready to begin?"

"Affirmative... But President, why do I have to take lessons related to acting?"

Asya replied decisively but suddenly tilted her head.

"Isn't there a saying that 'women are naturals as actresses'? Even without learning acting skills deliberately, I already have the good looks to become a movie star. Aren't I plenty talented already? Ehe."

"What shameless bragging coming from someone who completely lacks the skills to make effective use of this talent."

"No way! President, aren't you the one who kept praising my acting skills during these five days of special training!?"

Asya reacted to the accusation indignantly but President M shook her head.

"That is because so far, I only selected characters and scripts to accommodate your qualities. *Tarzan the King of the Jungle*, *Gladiator Spartacus*, *A Princess of Mars*, and *Lobo the Wolf King* all fall in this category."

"Eh? Really!?"

Asya reacted in surprise, unaware that the president had considerations on such a level.

"President, I thought you picked these extreme scripts only because you wanted to test if my acting skills could overcome barriers of gender, profession and even species!"

"Well, some of the roles were definitely more suited to you than I imagined, however..."

President M reached for the trunk case on the ground.

It opened with a click to show dozens of scripts inside. President M, whose gender and true identity were indeterminate, served simultaneously as the leader of five different cultural clubs, the UFO Research Club, the Literature Club, the Mass Media Research Club, the Science Insider Club and the Drama Club.

This pile of scripts were brought from the Drama Club's room.

Today, President M's selection was *Romeo and Juliet*.

"Honing your acting skills will improve your feminine charm—The plan is finally entering the second stage. Let this classic be our challenge today."

"Sir, yes sir!"

"...May I make one correction? Strictly speaking, shouldn't you be answering 'yes ma'am' at this time?"

Sir was a respectful form of addressing a man in English while ma'am was the female equivalent. To answer a female superior affirmatively, "yes ma'am" would be the proper choice, of course. However, Asya argued, "but saying it this way is easier to understand for people who aren't military enthusiasts. Besides, speaking of your gender, President, whether you're actually male or female..."

"I am the mother! Having said I'm the mother for all of you, of course I am the mother!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

While chatting, Asya also started to memorize the script. Observing quietly from the side, President M suddenly changed the subject and said, "By the way, you lot apparently survived many trials."

"Did Mutou-san tell you, President?"

"I heard a bit from her, but it is mainly my personal intuition. While I was sleeping during the camp at school last time, something big apparently happened in school."

"Hmm, actually, it was just a battle to be relished..."

Last month, a dragon king—Princess Yukikaze—attacked and targeted Haruga Haruomi.

The battlefield where the gang intercepted the white dragon king was precisely this Kogetsu Academy.

The shockwave and fiery explosion at the time had caused massive damage to much of the Sumida ward, the school included. Although unconscious at the time, President M had been right in the heart of it.

The president's frightening aspects were not limited to her shocking appearance or personality.

Apart from lucidity in thought, she also had a keen intuition like a possessed spirit medium. It was only foreseeable that she would realize the truth about Asya and the others.

But being a broad-minded person, President M was never prone to acting rashly. This fact was very reassuring.

I might as well rope the president into SAURU to have her(?) research weird techniques... While Asya was pondering this seriously, her thoughts were suddenly interrupted.

While reading the script, she suddenly noticed points of weirdness.

"This *Romeo and Juliet*, don't you find it strange?"

"Oh really?"

"Romeo is seventeen but Juliet is only thirteen? The two of them fell in love at first sight, betrothed themselves to each other that very night and decided to elope. After that, Juliet feigned her death, Romeo commits suicide in despair by poison and she follows him in death after waking up..."

"Nothing strange, is there? This story has been like that since four centuries ago."

"Isn't this tragedy avoidable if both of them had been slightly more careful? The circumstances leading to elopement were also very reckless. To be honest, both of them feel quite deplorable to me..."

"Such harsh criticism would be far too unromantic."

"Isn't this similar to that? Instances of fixed form beauty like how you can untie a sash automatically by having a lady-in-waiting spin around in period dramas. But once you notice details like that, it's very hard to immerse yourself in the show. Can we switch to a different script?"

"You're too much of a nitpicker," President M grumbled in a huff.

"Speaking of characters appearing in love stories, they have to be a little foolish at least—rather, I should say it's easier to move the plot if they're more simpleminded and flustered. This is what is called the principle of 'love is blind.' Isn't it quite similar to the messiness of love in the real world?"

"Oh come on, this is the first step towards my becoming an award-winning actress after all. Can't you give me a bit of preferential treatment?"

"Seriously... Then how about this one?"

President M handed over another script and Asya began to browse

through it.

"Oh... The stage is set in a certain country inside a school that combines middle and high school together. The main heroine is a second-year student in the middle school division. Introvert that she is, a certain incident allowed her to start getting to know an upperclassman in the high school division. As they grew closer and closer, they began to feel an attraction for each other..."

There was a plot summary included with the beginning part, so Asya read on.

"However, a shocking truth was soon uncovered—The two of them were actually siblings separated since birth. After learning that this was a taboo romance, the brother and sister decide to sever their feelings for each other. However, the flames of love not only failed to be extinguished but the two of them finally developed a forbidden relationship—I don't care about anything as long as I can be with Onii-chan'... Damn it!"

Asya was so emotional that she threw the script against the ground. President M frowned matter-of-factly.

"Hey you, what on earth is going on?"

"S-Sorry. This story is causing indescribable stress on my heart and soul, so I accidentally... Can I have another change of script?"

Asya used to roam battlefields as Europe's Shootdown Ace.

This powerful witch and seasoned veteran now had her mind stuck in numerous delusions.

'Haruomi-senpai, we are actually siblings.'

'From now on, can you love me as a real little sister...?'

'No, we're blood siblings, how can it turn into this kind of relationship!?''

'B-But truth be told, I also feel... towards you, Senpai—no, Onii-chan—!'

'Even if it's Onii-chan, as long as there's love, there will be no prob—'

To break out of all kinds of silly delusions, Asya shook her head

violently and screamed "ngahhhhhhh!" Panting heavily, she whispered, "...H-Hazumi isn't this type of character and there's no reason for her to make a mad dash down the road of forbidden love with that idiot Haruomi. Although I know that very well, this script is still too harmful for my mental health, that's why I want another script!"

"You're surprisingly fragile on the mental side. Nothing less expected from a useless girl who is a complete novice in the ways of love."

"Gah—"

"How about this? Just for reference, what kind of story would fit your tastes?"

"Hmm... I guess it has to be the kind of love story involving fashionable and stylish metropolitan romance, full of realism targeted for adults. I believe I'm a very good fit for this kind of story."

"Impossible. You're still dreaming even while uttering delusions with your eyes open, so please accept reality."

"H-How do you know unless we try!?"

"If you say so, then try we shall."

President M went through her trunk case again. Hence, the third script made an appearance.

"This is probably the script that fits your demands best."

"Mm-hmm... Uh, the beginning part is already concerning."

Asya pointed at where in the script she had an issue with.

"Two career women in the forties, drinking red wine at a Spanish bar—Such a lame scene appearing so suddenly..."

"Really? Two independent and self-determined women drinking wine while talking about love matters, isn't that a great scene?"

"More accurately, it seems more like they're binge drinking while complaining about their lack of luck in love. Not only that, speaking of these two women's prospective partners—"

Kazumi (age 39, single), an office worker who sees her purpose in life as paying for male company at host clubs.

Her best friend, Kyouko (age 40, single), who bought her apartment on a thirty-year loan and shares it with her sponger boyfriend who spends all his time at pachinko arcades and refuses to work.

Flipping through the pages noisily and reading on, Asya found additional points of contention.

"In addition, the third main character—Kentarou (age 35, divorced once)—is a criminal who spent every day at cabaret clubs, thus spending thirty million of his workplace's funds!? This is totally lame!"

"Fufufufu. Now here is the essence of today's lesson."

President M smiled suspiciously.

"Why don't you try acting out a character from this script, any character of your choosing. From that, you shall learn the spirit of self-sacrificing for love, even to the point of self-destruction!"

"A-And the purpose is!?"

"Although I've given you many lessons to boost your feminine charm and romance standard score... But to be honest, this education project is still twenty years from completion."

"That long!? I'll be an old lady by then!"

"That's why I tried to think in reverse. How about putting on hold your training to become an orthodox beauty, instead making your goal to become a girl with a love dependency constitution who pursues romance with reckless abandon? Something of that sort."

"Love dependency constitution!"

"Indeed. This lesson should be able to teach you what you lack most. On the battlefield of love, 'charging forward without thinking' is the most important!"

"E-Even though you already said it out personally."

"Listening alone isn't enough. Only by learning through inference, like carving this concept deeply into your soul, will it work. If your pathetic personality could be cured by listening to a few lectures,

you would have become an otome game heroine with one or two handsome men captured a long time ago."

"You're extremely right..."

"Back to the subject, which character do you intend to choose? In your case, I recommend the clothing store owner, Kyouko, who supports that human scum of a sponger. Don't you feel that it suits you quite well—"

"At least recommend a teenager role!"

Asya grumbled, almost about to break into tears.

"Then Juliet! I'll take Juliet, okay? I won't call her a slightly deplorable girl anymore!"

"Be my guest. Well then, begin the script reading."

"...Oh~ Romeo! Wherefore art thou Romeo~!?"

"No good. Completely no good. You have totally failed to express the feelings of having fallen deeply in love. I shall let it slide for now, so continue."

"S-Swear not by the moon, the inconstant moon, that monthly changes in her circled orb, lest that thy love prove likewise variable~"

Morning in a mixed forest, the drama lesson continued today as well. By the time President M announced the end of the training session, it was already after the warning bell five minutes before homeroom was heard.

Early July had arrived.

Tokyo New Town was under occupation for almost a month.

After that, Princess Yukikaze had not made any new moves. Everyone was able to maintain peaceful lives for now.

This applied to Asya and President M, as well as Haruga Haruomi and Juujouji Orihime alike. All of them were savoring this serenity and peace without exception.

Chapter 2 - Towards the World Outside

Part 1

Tokyo New Town had returned to a life of peace and stability for now. Although Hal and company knew that the situation would certainly not last indefinitely, for now, things were still in a rather relaxed state.

However, a certain person was injecting into their peaceful lives the poison known as "irregularity."

Namely, one of Hal's companions, Luna Francois Gregory.

"Welcome, Harry. Likewise to you, Asya, welcome to my office."

"W-What on earth made the school prepare this for you, a mere student..."

Asya grumbled with displeasure at the smug Luna Francois.

This was a small room somewhere in school. All the furniture including tables, chairs, cupboards and bookshelves were made of mahogany, resulting in a classic ambiance of elegance.

Thanks to the decor, the room had a solemn atmosphere almost like a principal's office.

However, the one sitting before the desk as the owner of the office was Luna Francois. Yet not only was she a student but she had only transferred in less than a month ago.

Luna went tsk-tsk and waggled her right index finger.

"Please allow me to make a correction. I am no ordinary student. In fact, as early as a week ago, I had been offered a position as a non-executive director on this school's board. Although I wanted to decline, seeing as it would be living too far above my means, at the school's repeated behest, I had no choice but to reluctantly..."

"As an American minor, Luna, receiving such an invitation is impossible!" Asya pointed out in fury.

"You clearly schemed your way with underhanded means to snag yourself that position!"

"Fufufufu. That would be a groundless accusation, Asya. Oh dear, all things considered, this school was founded with SAURU's funding and I am an important member of that organization. It wouldn't be surprising even if there were one or two unnatural and improper personnel assignments... Nevertheless, do you really think I would engage in such a ploy?"

"Isn't this tantamount to a confession already!?"

Luna Francois simply smiled tenderly at her fellow witch's accusation.

Meanwhile, Hal was thoroughly impressed by her shrewdness and asked, "Luna, you became the leader of SAURU's Kantou branch earlier too, could it be that you enjoy collecting these kinds of titles?"

"No, I have no interest in these worldly positions and titles."

The blonde witch winked lightly and replied.

"Conversely, I do enjoy exercising the convenient privileges that come along with status, such as this office provided for a non-executive director's use. Don't you find it very handy for skipping boring lessons?"

"Well said. If possible, please nominate me as the non-executive director's secretary."

"Oh dear, Harry. You are such a bad boy."

"Nowhere as impressive as you, my lord magistrate. By the way, I recently found the Tokyo specialty known as the 'golden monaka,' would you like to take some?"

"Really? But compared to confectionery, I still prefer genuine 24K gold."

"W-Why do you two look like you're really hitting it off!?"

Asya glared at Hal intently and grumbled.

This prompted Luna Francois to chuckle lightly with elegance.

"Seeing as this is a school, although it would pose *no difficulty* to find people who can recommend me to serve as a student leader—the student council president... I ruled it out in the end. After all,

the student council president is tied down by all kinds of mundane business to handle."

"Rather, that is pretty much the position in charge of mundane business."

"I know, right? While obtaining special positions, I feel that even if they come with special privileges, sinecures with a minimum of responsibilities would be best. Sure enough, aren't we of like minds, Harry?"

"That goes without saying. It's better for work to be more leisurely. No argument there."

"I can't feel any vitality or spirit of diligence here. That's so counter to the image of teenage high schoolers. Are you two comrades in that sense...?"

"That's true too. I guess I feel quite compatible with Luna?"

Hal nodded in agreement with Asya's comment.

Undoubtedly, Luna Francois was someone who lived in a gray zone tending towards black. Not only that, but she would occasionally employ "black" methods without hesitation to secure her own interests.

The two of them were birds of a feather in that aspect. This was also why Hal felt a sense of camaraderie with her.

"By the way, Luna, did you call us here just to introduce this office to us?"

"Yes. Please feel free to drop by any time you wish. Do remember to bring some snacks over when you come. I adore the cookies that Asya bakes. However, the cakes and pies from Asya's dessert factory have an excessive abundance of calories, so once a month would be plenty enough."

"Demanding gifts matter-of-factly and even placing orders so haughtily!?"

Shocked by her fellow witch's demands, Asya shrugged.

Lessons were over for the day at the high school division.

"Then I'm heading out first. There's a test involving Rushalka later

and I need to get to Tokyo Bay by taking a JMSDF battleship."

During the decisive battle the previous month, Asya's "serpent"—Rushalka—had been reborn.

After that, Asya had summoned her partner many times to carry out tests on various abilities including flying, mobility and pseudo-divinity over Tokyo Bay's waters.

Renowned in the past as Europe's strongest, Blue Rushalka, no problems had been found so far.

"If there are no problems today, it's time to certify Rushalka as fully revived."

"The European side will surely weep with joy if they found out. There will be an instant onslaught of loving calls to get you to go back, right?"

"That might happen, but a super formidable enemy, dragon king-class, is currently lurking in Tokyo after all," Asya responded to Hal.

"In the short term—I've no plans of returning."

"Fufufu. Are you worried by any chance? Because a woman like me is at Harry's side."

Smiling malevolently on the side was the blonde beauty, Luna Francois.

"All things considered, I am someone blessed with talent, intelligence and beauty while simultaneously favored by position and authority to an unbelievable extent... Even in a place like this, I am quite sought after (unlike Asya)."

"Hey! You added something unnecessary at the end, didn't you!?"

"No, nothing at all♪"

"Sheesh... Sigh, although I don't think I need to take your bragging nonsense seriously, I guess I should still respond. It's true, given Luna's deceptive way with words, casually captivating ten or twenty boys shouldn't be anything hard."

Hal had heard. The number of boys who confessed to Luna Francois Gregory had reached twenty-three so far. Even a cult of worshipers akin to a fan club was apparently in the works.

This news came not from elsewhere but enthusiastically from Luna herself.

"But something big like Haruomi having weird feelings for Luna, that's totally impossible."

"Oh dear, I cannot believe you would assert that."

Luna Francois frowned with surprise.

Most likely, she had always felt confident in her ability to toy with Asya on the palm of her hand.

However, Europe's former Shootdown Ace was now puffing out her meager chest in confidence. This composure made Luna Francois incredulous.

"In that case, there should be no problem if Harry and I were to go on a date tonight, right? I shall tempt him and captivate him with my charm."

"Be my guest and do whatever you want. Then I'll be going now."

Saying that, Asya left the office on her own.

Her pace was unusually fast. Slightly displeased, Luna Francois watched her leave then faced Hal again to suddenly smile.

"Now that Asya has said so, let us begin tonight. What are your thoughts, Harry?"

"Putting that aside... Think about it, we still have business to handle today, right? Before leaving, I'd like to get a few miscellaneous tasks sorted out. It's time for us to go too."

Tactfully brushing the issue aside, Hal made his way to the door.

Luna Francois' smile twitched slightly for an instant. However, she immediately recovered her elegance and reached for her schoolbag.

Thus, Hal and Luna Francois entered the corridor together.

While walking to their destination that was determined in advance, Luna secretly felt impressed. Asya's understanding of this childhood friend bound by inseparable ties—Haruga Haruomi's thought processes—was truly thorough...

Hal and Luna left the high school division and walked to the cultural clubs building.

The place where all culture-related clubs were gathered, it was a building adjacent to the library. The pair's destination was the room of the UFO Research Club on the third floor.

"Ah. Haruga-kun and... the rumored transfer student."

Although President M's gigantic figure was nowhere to be seen, someone else had already arrived at the UFO Research Club. A female student facing a laptop on the long table—Mutou-san.

"I knew it, she's someone in your circle—SAURU. Given how she transferred at the very end of the first term and also after Tokyo's occupation, I was certain of my guess. Could it be that she's a so-called witch like Juujouji-san and the others?"

"Correct. This perceptiveness already makes hiring you worth it."

"Fufufu. Actually, I have a gift for you."

Luna Francois smiled tenderly and took out something from her schoolbag.

It was a keycard, a key for entering the newly built Witch Mansion under the library. That place was also where Hal had obtained Hinokagutsuchi's heartmetal last month.

"Haven't you heard from Harry? This is an invitation to the secret garden."

"Wow. I humbly accept with gratitude."

Smiling, Mutou-san picked up the card that the blonde stranger had placed on the long table.

"Oh by the way, about the materials Haruga-kun sent me, I've forwarded them to the UFO Research Club's Sakuraba-senpai too, so you should get a response soon. Apart from that, after reading it, something bothers me."

Mutou-san turned the laptop screen towards Hal.

Displayed there was the basic information about leviathans, witches and dragons that he had sent her the previous day. Passionate in her research, she kept diligently seeking knowledge even after

school.

"Looking at the number of witches stationed across various eastern Asian countries... Japan, China, Korea and Indonesia have way more than the others. Does this have anything to do with economic conditions?"

"I suppose it does. After all, forging witch covenants is one of the services provided by SAURU for payment."

"Since the sponsors are local authorities or businesses, the economic climate inevitably has an effect. This cannot be helped either."

"Just as suspected. I was wondering if that was the reason."

Mutou-san nodded with understanding after listening to Hal and Luna Francois' answers.

"However, 'serpents' can't be mass produced using money alone."

"The most important is finding girls with inborn aptitude to become witches. Apart from that, obtaining enchanted artifacts to become leviathan cores—Grave Goods—is very important too. Even for economically wealthy countries, the number of 'serpents' is only *slightly more than for poor countries*."

"I see now. Oh, there's one more thing—"

Mutou-san continued, "As an amateur who's just starting to learn the ropes, this might be a subjective opinion, I guess? I feel that SAURU is a bit stingy for treating witch and dragon matters as secrets when they're making money from that kind of business. Things would go more smoothly if they did things in a more aboveboard manner."

"That aspect is very influenced by the outlook of the *old ladies*."

"Who are they?"

"They're consultants and supervisors who are very important to the leaders operating SAURU."

"Furthermore, they are also eyesores. A collective composed of old ladies who only like to reminisce about the past. Incidentally, they are still talking about matters from three hundred years ago even though it's already the twenty-first century, which is a bit too..."

"It seems quite useless to be concerned about witch hunts and inquisitions by this point."

Just as the topic started to offer Mutou-san a glimpse at the inside story—

A clatter of footsteps were heard from the corridor. Next, the UFO Research Club's door was flung open loudly. However, the one who entered was not a member of the club.

"Thank goodness, you're all here! Hey hey, listen up, listen up!"

It was the other classmate, Funaki-san, who had signed an employment contract with Hal.

Her twintails were shaking on the sides of her head. Looking like she had sprinted over as fast as she could, Funaki-san was panting heavily.

"Just now, I discovered someone amazing at the Kanegafuchi Station!"

The area around Kanegafuchi Station on the New Town Loop Line—

Prior to the return of dragonkind, it was just a suburban town of limited size. But the large-scale assaults of Raptors fifteen or so years ago had brought devastation to the surrounding area. After that, with the establishment of Tokyo New Town, this neighborhood had been redeveloped into an office district persisting to the present day.

The Metropolitan Police Department was also headquartered there. It was a neighborhood where Hal and the witches frequently visited.

Who exactly had she spotted there? The gossip-loving Funaki-san spoke up, "It's the handsome foreigner who was with us during the New Town Occupation last time."

"You mean the man who transformed into a dragon—no, the silver dragon that had merely taken on human form!?"

Listening to her classmate's report, Mutou-san jumped in surprise.

"Yeah, because he's so conspicuous, I couldn't possibly be mistaken. Although I chased after him in a hurry, I lost him along the way.

But that dragon person is definitely still in New Town."

Possibly a bit excited to see the handsome man's lovely face, Funaki-san was grinning from ear to ear.

In contrast, Hal frowned. The silver dragon Pavel Galad was still lurking somewhere in the Tokyo area. Most likely, he was plotting for a comeback.

Like Hal and company, he was probably making thorough preparations while taking precautions for the next commotion.

"We have no choice but to prepare properly for the next time too. Let us depart, Harry."

"Yeah. Let's meet up with Juujouji earlier and go together to see how *that person* is doing."

Thus, the miscellaneous task of handing the keycard to Mutou-san was done.

However, the day's main event had yet to debut. Hal and Luna exchanged nods.

Part 2

Roughly two hours later, Hal was at a different venue. Taking a taxi together with Luna Francois, he had gone to a hotel near Kanegafuchi Station.

The sixty-story skyscraper was a luxury hotel whose premises were deemed "super" from the fortieth floor and up.

This was originally a place where Haruga Haruomi would never frequent on his own.

Hal had always used reasonably priced inns or business hotels. The lack of hot water for baths was not an infrequent occurrence.

However, the same did not apply to the girl accompanying him. The large suite situated on the fifty-fifth floor of this building was precisely Luna Francois' "new residence." Back when she first decided to live in Tokyo New Town, moving house and living alone were considered too much of a hassle. Hence, she chose to live in a hotel instead.

As was customary, a master-class witch would be handsomely compensated for each sortie.

Luna Francois had dominated the trans-Pacific region as the Shootdown Ace for four years already. This extravagant lifestyle was befitting of her position and wealth.

After meeting up with Orihime who was waiting in the hotel lobby, the group's destination was—

"Hmm... Indeed it is not a bad contrivance."

The location was a heated swimming pool on the fifty-eighth floor of the skyscraper. A hotel facility.

Murmuring with a haughty expression was Hinokagutsuchi. The former queen of dragons was reclining lazily on a poolside lounge chair.

Furthermore, casually lifted in her hand was a glass filled with golden champagne.

"It was worth specially preparing this reception to hear this response of yours."

"Brat, is this going according to your plan?"

"I thought up the basic concept but I left stuff like the specific venue to Luna to plan out. The remaining preparations were only just completed by enlisting Juujouji's help—Something like that."

Sitting on the diving board on the poolside in his swimming trunks, Hal answered leisurely.

In addition, Hinokagutsuchi had finally changed her attire from her usual scarlet kimono. Like Hal, she was in swimwear.

A young body corresponding to an eleven or twelve-year-old's, clad in a red bikini.

"I see now. A venue overlooking the lower world from a great height could be considered a contrivance befitting an exalted queen such as I. It appears that you are quite well-versed in the etiquette of pleasing important guests."

"In return, please continue to look after us by providing information and various support."

"Well, I shall consider it."

It was currently after 7pm.

Looking down from this fifty-eighth floor, whose walls were made of glass, the night scenery of New Town was akin to hundreds of gemstones scattered on black velvet—Extravagant with a dash of decadence.

With the night scenery as a side dish to go along with her drink, Hinokagutsuchi downed her glass of champagne in one breath.

"Thanks, Juujouji."

"Uh... Is this the moment when I should be offering 'Would you like another glass?'"

"It would not be a bad idea. However, I am personally looking forward to an elaborate performance along the lines of 'pouring wine while providing a deliberate view of your chest.'"

"K-Kagutsuchi-san. You really must rein in such words of sexual harassment!"

Orihime sighed and approached. The novice witch was also dressed in a bikini.

The white two-piece swimsuit, pure and simple, looked quite good on her. Orihime tilted the champagne bottle in her hand and refilled Hinokagutsuchi's glass.

"My goodness. And I was wondering what it was about when suddenly told that we had to assemble at a hotel..."

"Well actually, I could be the waiter to serve her too."

"Spare me that sort of farce. As if anyone would drink alcohol poured by a squalid man. Rather, it would be an insult to me, one who had been served by hundreds of priestesses and shrine maidens with reverence."

"I knew she was going to gripe like that."

"That's why you asked Orihime-san and I to offer our services, isn't that right?"

It was Luna Francois who spoke this time.



She was dressed in an extremely attractive, even seductive, black bikini while holding a dish piled with fruit. It was like a small mountain of watermelon, pineapple, mango, lemon, banana, lychee, papaya, etc.

"If it would please you, shall I use this fruit to concoct a cocktail for you?"

"Mm-hmm. You may have free rein."

Hinokagutsuchi partially closed her eyes in satisfaction in response to Luna Francois' suggestion.

Her mood definitely seemed better than usual. Sure enough, she was very appreciative of female company despite calling herself a "queen"... Not only that, she clearly enjoyed *the female form*.

Hal nodded while giving a warning, "Let's be upfront with the rules. No making moves on the dancer girls."

"Well, fine. The pleasures of debauchery shall be enjoyed another day. Impatience is ill-suited to merrymaking in that arena. Only by taking things step by step will one be able to fully savor the experience."

"Now that's quite convincing coming from a former queen."

"Th-That kind of event isn't going to happen any time, even in the future! Kagutsuchi-san!"

As a side note, these familiar faces were the only ones present at the pool. For the sake of today's reception, Luna Francois had reserved the entire venue.

While being served by two beautiful maidens, Hinokagutsuchi sipped cold champagne.

Her sharp gaze was directed at New Town's night scenery every now and then. Haughty and indomitable, the way she conducted herself exuded dignity befitting a self-styled "queen" with every move.

It was not just the night scenery. Likewise, she was examining the girls next to her with satisfaction.

As mentioned previously, Orihime's was white while Luna Francois was clad in a black bikini. The two of them were also wearing pareos around their waists and artificial flower wreaths on their heads.

But more importantly—

Orihime and Luna Francois had excellent figures to begin with.

Hal had already confirmed the wonders of Juujouji Orihime's body with his eyes and his right hand. Now that he was allowed to confirm again at the poolside, it was truly a feast for the eyes.

Those bulges of her bosom, estimated to be F-cups. The curve of a

tight, narrow waist. The wondrous roundness of the buttocks.

Going further, there were those thighs, so slender despite their overall fullness, tracing out beautiful curves all the way to her ankles in a display of irresistible charm. Whether the sexiness in the line of the neck or the posture of her body, slightly huddled in embarrassment, everything was beautiful. Beyond perfect.

Next, there was—Luna Francois.

With her standing next to Orihime, one could see that she had an excellent figure rivaling the young Japanese maiden's.

However, Luna Francois was actually a bit taller, probably around 170cm. Although the various sizes as indicated by her height and BWH measurements were overall similar to Orihime's, the American girl edged out slightly in the bust and hip numbers...

Inexplicably voluptuous despite a very slim figure overall.

Luna Francois' body was a perfect coexistence of two contrary elements.

Furthermore, the hue of her complexion was very striking. Orihime had healthy ivory-tone skin but in contrast, Luna Francois' skin was breathtakingly pale and as smooth as porcelain.

Delicate skin texture with excellent suppleness.

Luna was apparently a frequent patron of this hotel's beauty salon. The creation of such extravagant beauty would be impossible without being backed by a commensurate input of time, effort and money.

"Although it might be a little late to mention now, may I ask a question?"

Orihime suddenly spoke up.

"I have no problem with holding a reception as a gesture of gratitude for Kagutsuchi-san's many acts of guidance, but it seems that Haruga-kun's presence isn't necessary..."

"What are you talking about, Juujouji? But what you make a perfectly valid point."

Hal put on a serious poker face and objected.

"Even someone like me would want to seize rare fortune once in a while. And now is exactly one of those occasions!"

"Abundant honesty in this area is precisely one of those things that make Harry amusing... Oh well, a mere look at swimsuits would not be too much as a privileged perk for the show's producer."

Luna smiled malevolently after offering her opinion and immediately winked suggestively at Hal.

"Or would you rather see something more amazing?"

"L-Luna-san, Haruga-kun is a closet pervert. You mustn't tease him recklessly!"

"I-I do draw the line somewhere proper, you know? Stop worrying about me."

After defending himself, Hal turned his gaze to Hinokagutsuchi's prepubescent body in a swimsuit.

"Anyway, information is essential to us right now. Although I'm not going to demand that you spit out everything you know, please try to tell us as much potentially useful information as possible."

Dressed in swimwear like the girls, Hal spoke to Hinokagutsuchi once more.

He summoned the magic gun—the magic wand—with his right hand. This was currently the vessel possessed by the ghost of the former dragon as well as the "testament to the covenant" between Hal and Hinokagutsuchi.

"You can have as many receptions for thanks as you like. I'll even prostrate myself if need be. Please."

"Well, after all, you and I are currently in the same boat, so to speak..."

Showing a faint smile, Hinokagutsuchi emptied her glass again.

Orihime immediately refilled the champagne. Bubbles of carbon dioxide popped audibly.

"If you cater to me dutifully, perhaps I might tell stories from the past or offer rare advice on whim. Be that as it may, I have no intention of going chronologically in sequence. Naturally, I cannot

be bothered to teach tirelessly in earnest detail either. Listen carefully if you understand."

"That goes without saying."

"In that case, may I ask a question right off the bat?"

In front of the nodding Hal, Luna Francois spoke up.

"It was quite inconvenient last time with me being the only one unable to use the Rune of the Bow, wasn't it? I wish to make proper use of that rune's magical power, whatever it takes."

"Oh—?"

"So how exactly could it be done? Personally, I intend to assist Harry without reservation."

"Listen, blonde priestess, the reason is due to your harboring of ulterior motives."

After asserting that, Hinokagutsuchi snickered and did not continue her answer.

"Meaning she can't become a vassal unless she aids me while abandoning all thought of risk and benefit, you know? Consider this, Master Bruce Lee used to say 'don't think, feel,' right?"

"...In other words, the crucial element consists of guiding principles along the likes of friendship power and bonds of the heart?"

"Yeah. Basically those shounen manga principles that transcend logic and foreshadowing. Friendship, hard work, victory."

After listening to Hal's explanation, Luna Francois fell into deep thought.

But before long, she gazed at Hinokagutsuchi's smiling face and asked again, "Now that I understand the precondition, please allow me to ask another question. A secret technique to easily borrow Harry's power without having to jump through this massive nuisance of attached strings—Is there really none?"

"...You two are truly alike."

"...I don't deny that."

Hal admitted it without thinking, prompting Hinokagutsuchi to shrug.

"In that case, the rest depends on this brat. If he were to desire your loyalty and submission from the bottom of his heart, wishing to claim your body and soul for his own possession, he could apparently regard you as a vassal by force."

"Is that so? In other words, there is a method after all."

Luna Francois smiled suspiciously after listening to Hinokagutsuchi.

Meanwhile, watching on the side with a champagne bottle in her hand. Orihime began to grow anxious for some reason.

"H-Hold on, Luna-san. Although Haruga-kun looks like a herbivore, his true nature is a boy both closeted and perverted. If you tease him like this, the dark side of the Force might accidentally awaken. Please beware!"

"Hmm—Orihime-san, could it be that you have experienced it personally yourself?"

"N-No, I haven't. It was just an objective deduction. Haruga-kun, you too, stop getting funny ideas!"

"I-I know. Putting that aside, I do have a question too."

Since the conversation had strayed in a weird direction, Hal instantly changed the subject.

"Whether the secret of dragons or Princess Yukikaze's origins, I've got a ton of things I want to know. But out of all that, there's something I want to know with top priority."

"Oh? And what question is burning you to such an extent, brat?"

"If there are dragonslaying runes still scattered somewhere on Earth, can you tell me where? Although we've got the Bow in our possession at the current stage, I'd like to get my hands on one or two more runes."

Orihime and Luna reacted with surprise. In the earlier battle against True Genbu-Ou, what finally became the decisive factor for victory had been the Rune of the Sword borrowed from Pavel Galad.

However, if they were to find themselves in a similar predicament

again, they would have to overcome the challenge on their own—

After all, the silver dragon was not necessarily going to side with them next time.

As expected, Hinokagutsuchi responded haughtily.

"Hmph. Do know that the dragonslaying runes are priceless treasures sought by all dragons fervently, not little pebbles. How could they possibly be left on the ground randomly? If you wish to seek them, it is necessary to go on an adventure no less epic than making your destination the stars of Ruruk Soun on the far side of the ocean of stars, wandering the dimensional gap somewhere in the multiverse, or visiting extraordinary realms of the demonic and the sacrosanct..."

At this point, Hinokagutsuchi suddenly fell silent.

After brief contemplation, she slowly started speaking again.

"Nevertheless... You may not need to go that far on this occasion. I have a clue here."

The former dragon king's words implied the beginning of a brand new journey.

At the same time, it was an opportunity leading Hal and his gang out of Tokyo New Town.

Part 3

"Eh? You are going on a trip!?"

"That's right. *In short*, the destination is a beach at Izu Peninsula."

Hal nodded at his surprised junior—Shirasaka Hazumi.

It was the next day after the swimsuit reception. Hazumi had paid a visit to the Haruga house again instead of making a morning call by phone. Hence, Hal announced his "expedition plan" to her.

The two of them had left the Haruga house. Hal filled her in while heading to the nearest Narihirabashi Station.

"Summer vacation will start in a few days, so we're planning to set off the first day. The purpose of this trip will be as mentioned just now, to search for a new dragonslaying rune."

"The new weapon you mentioned earlier that you wanted..."

"That's why I'd like to investigate the clue Hinokagutsuchi provided. However, there's no loss even if nothing turns up. It's still better than doing nothing at all, after all."

"I understand. Then in your absence, Senpai, I will hold the fort properly."

Slightly tensing her adorable face, Hazumi exhibited her "determination."

"Please focus on your task and do not worry about New Town. Despite how I may look, I've always worked hard on my own before the arrival of my seniors. It will definitely be fine!"

Quite a strong-willed declaration—rather, it was a declaration to express her trustworthiness.

Originally, Shirasaka Hazumi had been the only witch defending Tokyo New Town. That was before Orihime became a witch and the arrival of Asya and Hal to New Town.

With Minadzuki as her only partner, the young Hazumi had fought and battles on her own and survived all those years.

For this purpose, she was not allowed to leave Tokyo and could not even participate in school excursions.

Hence, that was probably why she reflexively concluded "she had to hold the fort" when told that Hal was going on an expedition. However, Hal had prepared a surprise for her.

"No, Shirasaka. This time, you're coming along too."

"—Eh?"

"I already made arrangements with New Town's administration and the sponsors last night, so there's no problem. Authorization has been secured for you and Juujouji to leave New Town temporarily."

"I-In other words..."

"I'm sorry you have to rush out as soon as the summer vacation starts, but I'd like you to come on the trip with us. There's me, Juujoji, Asya, Luna and Hinokagutsuchi. What do you say?"

"With pleasure, of course! It has really really been a long time since I last traveled!"

As expected, the junior student's entire face lit up with a dazzling smile.

But what Hal did not expect was for her to throw herself against his chest, overjoyed. Hugged by Hazumi, Hal could not help but begin to panic.

"Although I've traveled with family during the early years of elementary school, ever since becoming a witch, I almost never leave Tokyo..."

"Th-The itinerary was left to SAURU's Kenjou-san to plan."

With Hazumi leaning tightly against him, Hal spoke while his heart raced.

It was all because of his close contact with the adorable junior student's soft sensation and body warmth.

"He said remember to bring a swimsuit. I guess we're treating it as a company recreation trip while we're at it."

"I-I only have the swimsuit I use for the school pool. I suppose it's

better if I bring a different one, right!?"

"How about taking this opportunity to buy a new one?"

Although a little frightened by Hazumi's rare excitement, Hal still nodded. Putting in so much effort was worth it, even if only just to see this reaction...

"Say, there are fanatical fans of the school swimsuit too."

"I will go shopping immediately after school!"

Swiftly disengaging herself from hugging Hal, Hazumi declared very energetically.

Whether the hug or separating herself, it seemed as though both were subconscious acts for Hazumi. Seeing Hazumi excited for the "beach trip," Hal felt very gratified—yet he was starting to worry too.

"By the way, it's better if you don't get your hopes too high. Although it's a beach, our destination isn't anywhere like a 'tropical paradise' or an 'island closest to heaven.'"

He could not allow Hazumi's anticipation level to rise too high.

Slightly worried about that, Hal tried to put a damper on things.

"Although I'm not too clear on what Japanese beaches are like, from what I've heard, there seem to be many desolate places."

Haruga Haruomi had been to all kinds of dangerous places, mysterious realms and overseas locations.

However, he had little experience in visiting ordinary Japanese tourist attractions. After all, the vast majority of his trips were work related. That being said, he still had recollections to a certain extent.

'Seaside swimming that was so packed that it was like washing potatoes,' 'expensive and poor tasting ramen at seaside establishments,' 'hotspring towns that went in recession with a decline in tourists,' 'dinner at inns that inexplicably served defrosted sashimi despite being located by the sea.'

Recalling these memories, he warned in advance just in case.

However, Hazumi smiled like an angel as usual and said seriously, "That would be fine too. I am extremely happy simply to be able to visit the beach with you, Senpai, Nee-sama and the others."

"I see now."

"By the way, Senpai, why travel to Izu?"

"Back when I got my hands on Hinokagutsuchi's heartmetal earlier—There were mentions about a shrine in the Tokai region that worshiped her as a 'fire goddess,' right? That particular shrine is located at Izu."

"—!"

'Although I quite enjoy Atami Castle and the Banana Crocodile Park, I don't have the fortitude to go all the way to the Izu Islands to scuba dive.'

"I knew it, would it be better to treat it as a relaxing tourist destination for recuperation?"

'Indeed. A soothing place unsuitable for seeking thrills and the latest trends, I guess.'

Hal was having a conversation with Kenjou Genya displayed on his cellphone screen.

During lunch break at the library's underground level—the temporary Witch Mansion. Hal had specifically come here to hold a video conference with one of SAURU's few permanently stationed staff at Tokyo New Town.

Fourth level underground. A vast floor with a forest of steel shelves.

This was also the place where Hinokagutsuchi's heartmetal had been found previously. As always, the shelves were stuffed full of antiques and ancient artifacts.

Young man Kenjou's voice resounded in this disorganized space, roughly the size of four classrooms.

'Well, since it's the Izu area, you can still hurry back even if New Town has an emergency, or send a serpent remotely. It should be quite appropriate to treat it as the destination for a company

recreation trip.'

"I see."

'Go frolic in the sea and eat some roasted conch-in-the-shell. Thanks to your authority, those nagging sponsors were all silenced successfully.'

"That's thanks to Luna, not me."

'Hey hey, the only reason why Miss Gregory is using her status as a SAURU cadre to put pressure on various circles and show off her deep ties with the TPDO is ultimately because you're at New Town.'

On the small LCD screen, Kenjou smiled malevolently.

Permission for Hazumi and Orihime to "leave New Town" could not be given so easily. The two witches were supposed to be stationed at Tokyo New Town constantly, focused on the task of defense. This viewpoint was deeply entrenched in the New Town region and the minds of sponsors.

This mindset was particularly bolstered by the unusual increase in dragon appearances recently.

"This is quite refreshing once in a while. "Exerting pressure on the government and businesses," don't you find that very secret association-like?'

"Even though the New Town branch was clearly a small and insignificant place not too long ago."

'Indeed. Let us gradually increase our branch's authority according to this pace. Also, I've already sent you an email about local conditions. Call me if there's anything you're unclear about. Bye now.'

The chat with Kenjou ended there.

Kenjou was definitely a young man worthy of the description "handsome" if only he would ditch the unkempt facial hair and other flaws of sloppiness. Instead of joining this expedition, he was staying back to hold the fort. If necessary, he would also serve as backup to provide support to Hal and company depending on the situation.

"I need to hurry and recruit him to *my side* too..."

Just as Hal was muttering to himself—

The door to this floor opened and Luna Francois entered.

"So you're here, Harry. I spent so much time looking for you."

"You could've called or sent a text. Is there something urgent?"

"Yes. I suppose that wouldn't be an incorrect way of putting it... Listen, Harry, don't you feel that the two of us should become more intimate? Or perhaps call it deepening our mutual understanding."

"On the other hand, I think we're intimate enough already."

"To start things off—Let us have lunch together, just the two of us. I haven't had lunch yet and I recently discovered a nice restaurant nearby—"

"What shame. I already ate some bean jam bread."

"Would you be free today after school? I have some minor business at SAURU's Yokohama branch. Could you accompany me? Shall we go for a spin and enjoy some alone time together?"

"Sorry, but I'm already booked for today. Let's see next time."

"..."

"..."

"Listen, Harry, do you know you've been very cold starting a few days ago even when I make passes at you? Are you pretending not to notice my feelings?"

Luna Francois finally could not help but furrow her brow and started to complain about Hal's attitude.

"Is this the latest fad? A tactic for men to intentionally pretend to be dense so as to avoid disrupting harem situations where they are surrounded by girls?"

"Nope. After all, I basically know your thoughts and intents. Pretending to like me so that I'd feel that way and become able to entrust the Rune of the Bow to you—That's what you're planning, right? According to what Hinokagutsuchi told you yesterday."

"Since you already comprehend to this extent, Harry, why don't you just play along obediently?"

Luna Francois spoke with an expression of worldly understanding.

"The ability to accept a woman's adorable pranks is precisely the generosity a man ought to have. Given Glinda and my power with the power of dragonbane added, wouldn't that stack strength upon strength, like 'arming an ogre with a metal club' as the Japanese saying goes?"

After saying that, she went further and smiled seductively.

"Besides, you will get to enjoy a 'romance game' with me. Harry, don't you find this reason to be plenty sufficient already?"

"I can understand that the reason is very legitimate, but it's still a bit hard to accept."

Hal muttered quietly with a sigh.

"Since I've never thought of master magi like you and Asya as members of the opposite sex, it's quite hard to view you as that kind of partner."

"Are you implying a kind of professional awareness—an inability to regard work partners as romantic prospects?"

"Probably the exact opposite. Although this is just my personal view, I've mentally listed out the 'top three professions one should avoid as marriage prospects if possible.' Actresses are third on the list."

"That's quite a rare view. Normally, actresses would tend to be very popular."

"Among women in that line of work, there are many who think of themselves as the protagonist, living their lives as though they were the center of the world. Despite their outward glamor, stress does build up and it's apparently quite hard to build romantic relationships in private. It's said that resignation rates at talent management agencies are very high."

"Then what is second on your list?"

"So-called authors, like female manga artists or novelists. Both are

professions with quite high rates of divorce. Sigh, I suppose it's the same for both genders in this respect."

After saying that, Hal continued with an additional explanation, "By the way, the reason is similar as for actresses. Apparently, many of them either have queenly dispositions or they're princesses who need to be pampered. Although it's fun to be friends with people like that, it's a bit much to treat them as romantic prospects."

"...Harry, your viewpoint almost sounds as though you're trying to pick a fight with the entire industry there."

"No no no, I think those in the industry will agree with me instead. Finally, the champion spot goes to master-class witches, of course. All of them are beautifully broken."

Fairly recently, Hal had said the following to Juujouji Orihime:

You probably won't accomplish much as a witch. The knowledge and techniques of the unorthodoxy are things belonging to darkness and their mastery requires a learning witch to have a matching disposition.

Luna Francois smiled a little wryly and nodded.

"I concede that. With cases like Asya around us, Harry, your viewpoint might be quite reasonable. Apart from her, our ranks include a world-class authority on the research of cannibalism, a noblewoman alchemist who is also a fan of male homoerotic fiction, someone with a cleanliness obsessive compulsive disorder who spends five hours a day taking baths, an armchair witch who never takes a single step out of the house no matter what..."

"A partial list already feels quite unbearable."

Witches were categorized from Level 1 to 5 according to their abilities.

Only witches Level 4 or above received master-class certification. In Asya and Luna Francois' case, they were the cream of the crop, two witches from a total of only eight in the world to reach Level 5.

As far as Hal knew, not even one of these witches had a "kind and pleasant personality."

It was quite uncanny now that one thought about it, but master-class witches consisted only of eccentrics, weirdos, prodigies and

unconventional geniuses, all featuring bizarre personalities. As one might expect, only those possessing this type of character, labeled as one category, would naturally reach heights of accomplishment in exploring the dark body of knowledge of magic.

"However, I am unlike the others whom no man in their right mind would approach."

Luna Francois pointed her index finger at herself and smiled seductively.

"You know that I am very popular, don't you?"

"Yeah, you quite enjoy shooting down the boys who attempt to ask you out one after another. I've heard you mention it yourself before."

"Indeed, I am also a Shootdown Ace in that regard."

As a strategist adept at negotiations, Luna Francois had quite a way with people.

The majority of master-class witches were eccentrics. Among these genius-type characters with poor communication skills, Luna's personality traits were extremely rare.

However, sociability did not equate to nobility in character. Hal sighed towards the sky.

"Anyway, I'm ultimately going to get dumped if I bite on your hook."

"Don't worry, Harry. I will favor you with special treatment."

"Huh?"

"I really cannot promise a lifetime, but for a short duration—approximately two years—How about we thoroughly enjoy a romance game together? Worry not, I have already conceived most of the script."

"Script!?"

"The setting starts with love at first sight on my part. In the beginning, I will actively seek dates to present my appeal. This is Season 1."

The blonde witch explained in quite a rhythmic tone of voice.

"Season 2 will have me living in your home. Due to a promise between our parents, Harry, we are actually engaged to each other—Such a retroactive backstory is revealed. Hence, I begin to take up residence in your home as your fiancée..."

"It's almost like a plot twist in weekly manga."

"Season 3 will have the two of us on a world tour as a premarital trip. Season 4 will finally be the advent of the eve before marriage. The theatrical release will be inserted at this point. After a spectacle worthy of a Hollywood blockbuster, I unfortunately lose my memory. Finally, we step into the ending arc with two people in love with each other yet going their separate ways, a surprising breakup. Thus, towards a future filled with hope... Ready? Go."

"What a super long story..."

"I am willing to play a romance game with you, Harry, following such a flowchart. During this time, please enjoy my charm to your heart's content. To you, isn't this equivalent to a heaven-sent chance for you to experience the privilege of being Luna Francois Gregory's partner? Even if there is a time limit, wouldn't it still be extreme happiness?"

Suddenly, Luna Francois drew her face near.

Smiling suspiciously, the blonde girl's beautiful face was right before his eyes. Despite the calculative nature of her proposal, Haruga Haruomi could not help but feel his heart racing.

"However, this is ultimately just a 'game,' right? It's not like I get to romance you for real."

"That being said, many fan service scenes have been planned for the sake of securing audience votes during serialization."

"Fan service scenes!?"

"Changing mishaps exposing me in underwear. Harry walking into the bathroom coincidentally when I'm showering. Two people tangled together in scandalous postures. Since I am American, kissing you on the cheek is natural physical contact, almost turning into a lover's kiss by accident—Perhaps it could develop into a relationship just short of crossing the line."

Haruga Haruomi was a high school boy who had personally admitted to being a "closet pervert."

After listening to the pre-planned story, he had almost fallen for Luna Francois' proposal, of course. Fortunately, he managed to keep himself together by way of a gentleman's pride.

Trying to maintain a composed expression as much as he can, he said calmly, "No, but in the end, it's just playing at couples. Beyond a certain line, everything ends in abortive attempts. Isn't this hands-off style no longer fashionable?"

"Silly Harry, even a 'game' can be played for real, you know?"

"..."

At that moment, Luna Francois smiled adorably.

It was undoubtedly an impish smile. While feeling his heart pound faster, Hal contemplated calmly in a corner of his mind. *Well, the final point she raised would presumably be nothing but lip service.*

Such provocative suggestions were completely part and parcel of the art of persuasion.

However, he could also think from another perspective. If he were to go through with this, it would count as a state of "increased intimacy." A sudden "vassal covenant" like in Orihime's case arising would not be impossible.

Hal tried to call the magic gun with his right hand. While gazing into Luna's beautiful face, he silently spoke in his mind.

—Make this girl my vassal.

Nothing happened. Hence, Hal was certain of one thing.

"Hmm. I knew it, this route doesn't seem to work."

"...Harry, you are suddenly making an expression of comprehension, you know?"

"This gun is actually the 'wand' that teaches me the magic of Ruruk Soun. Thanks to summoning it just now, I'm now clear on the conditions for obtaining a vassal."

His heart rate had stopped speeding up. Hal smiled wryly and said,

"A relationship of control, possession, mutual trust or similar must be created between me and the intended covenant target. Alternatively, I have to hold either an intense obsession or a deep-seated delusion about the one I want to make my vassal."

"Obsession or delusion..."

"In the style of the twenty-first century, that means I can't make you vassal unless I desire you to the point of becoming a stalker, Luna. That's not gonna fly no matter how you cut it."

In front of the deeply pensive Luna Francois, Hal shrugged.

"So that's that. Let's be decisive and give up on the love simulation game route. Asking me to be that infatuated with you when you reveal your hand right off the bat, that's way too hard. However, completing a covenant naturally through normal interaction is possible."

"..."

"To be honest, that's how it was done with Shirasaka and Juujouji."

"Harry, what you say is not quite right, is it?"

Seeing her expression suddenly revert to seriousness, Hal went "eh?" in surprise.

Luna Francois continued to speak in a rational tone of voice.

"Friendship, hard work and victory will always reap success—The world is nowhere near that friendly, is it? Besides, you and I are birds of a feather, Harry. We are both at high risk of becoming intellectual criminals given our calculative and shortcut-loving natures and twisted hearts, you know? I believe that it will be no easy task to cultivate a trusting relationship of the kind you described."

"R-Really?"

"Indeed. Hence, this is what I think. Chances might be higher if I used my charm to seduce you with a honey trap, Harry, to make you so infatuated with me that you virtually become a stalker."

"No, like I said, you already revealed your own hand, this'll surely —"

"Not a problem. People still hope to form romantic relationships with others despite knowing they are being deceived."

"..."

This declaration was very objective and rational. Hal fell silent.

He could not help but agree with Luna Francois' assertion. It was precisely because of this principle that Kabuki-chō in Shinjuku, Ginza and the Roppongi neighborhood were able to prosper as Japan's premier entertainment and red-light districts in the olden days, fostering intense competition between those in the "water trade" such as hosts or hostesses, known euphemistically as "nocturnal butterflies," "empresses," or "kings of the night."

Faced with Hal who had given up on arguing back, the beautiful blonde witch smiled again.

"In addition, if the deceiver happened to be Luna Francois Gregory, then victory is all but guaranteed. Besides, Harry, you are quite an amazing closet pervert, aren't you?"

"...I suppose."

"Fufufu, after all, you even harbor such thoughts towards Orihime-san and Hazumi-san too. In that case, there shouldn't be any problem. Please accept my poisoned fangs, be a good boy and fall head over heels over me."

"My right to refuse—"

"Does not exist. Speaking of which, perhaps this expedition might be perfect timing. During the trip, I shall tempt you in all kinds of ways, so look forward to it, okay? Please become my captive as soon as possible and offer up the dragonslaying rune as tribute. Understood?"

Luna Francois' declaration made Hal painfully aware of this: no matter how excellent a schemer, no matter how adept at social interactions, sure enough, she was still a master-class witch. The notions in her mind were all beautifully broken.

Never did he expect to reach this kind of conclusion through this sort of development...

"Goodbye, Harry. Before retiring to bed tonight, I shall phone you

to say goodnight,"

After taking her leave, Luna Francois departed lightly.

Chapter 3 - Sea, Swimsuits and the Mysterious Stone Fragment

Part 1

"Look quickly, Nee-sama! There's a kind of coconut tree!"

"You're right. This feels more like a resort than I expected."

On the Sagaminada shore of Atami City in the Shizuoka prefecture

Inside a minivan that was racing along a coastal national highway...

Shirasaka Hazumi smiled cheerfully while looking at the expansive urban scenery outside the window as well as the Sagaminada sea. As for Juujouji Orihime, she was watching her cousin with a smile.

They had set off on the first day of the summer vacation. Fortunately, it was an excellent sunny day.

Orihime was dressed in a tank top of white lace and shorts whereas Hazumi was in casual wear with a patterned one-piece dress and a cardigan. The two of them were sitting behind the driver in the second row of seats.

Likewise sitting in the same row was Asya, namely, Anastasya Rubashvili.

This minivan had a maximum capacity of seven passengers. Three people were supposed to be able to fit in the second row.

Besides, Asya and Hazumi were petite while Orihime's figure was quite svelte too. Even with the three of them sitting side by side, it was not cramped at all.

That being said, Asya, sitting on the right, looked displeased.

She kept glaring at Hal, who was in the driver's seat, gripping the steering wheel—as well as Luna Francois in the front passenger seat.

Incidentally, Asya was wearing a short-sleeved parka and three-quarter-length cargo pants. As habitually, Luna was dressed in a classy black dress, standing in stark contrast to Asya.

"Harry, would you like to have some chilled mandarin orange?"

"They're still being sold? I didn't even see any at the shops in the station. I thought they had been relegated to legendary fantasy food already."

"Don't worry. They are actually still produced in small quantities and can be ordered online and purchased at certain stations."

"I see—"

"I've heard that it's a seasonal tradition as part of nostalgic Japanese travel, so I ordered some. A rare trip... Today will commemorate our first time traveling together."

"Oh okay."

"Please be patient. I shall peel it for you presently."

"You don't have to go to so much trouble. I can peel it on my own."

"No, it would be too dangerous. Aren't you driving at the moment, Harry...? This really is cold, it is hurting my fingertips a little."

"Oh... I'm serious, just hand me a whole mandarin. I'd feel bad otherwise."

"Fufufu, don't worry, I have already finished peeling. By the way, this is how it feels."

"—So cold! D-Don't suddenly touch my ear, okay? I'm driving after all."

"My apologies, did I startle you? Well then, Harry, please open your mouth."

"Huh?"

"Making you extend your hand while you're driving would definitely be a bit dangerous, Harry. Hence, I shall feed you instead. Could you say 'ah~' for a sec? It would be safer this way—"

"Of course not! Luna and Haruomi, cut it out!"

Asya suddenly roared, causing Hazumi and Orihime to jump in fright.

The two Japanese girls had apparently been watching the scenery outside the window, chatting happily, getting along with perfect

harmony, which was why they had not noticed the interactions between the two in the front seats. Orihime then asked, "What's the matter, Asya-san?"

"Did they do something?"

"Nothing at all. It's just Luna making inappropriate jokes and Haruomi grinning idiotically on the side..."

When Hazumi inquired as well, Asya replied with irritation.

Listening to the conversation in the back seats, Hal glanced at the rear-view mirror while driving to check his own expression. Phew, no idiotic grin.

"Stop talking nonsense. I've been driving very seriously the whole time, okay?"

"Indeed. I only played a little prank because Harry wasn't speaking much to me. Please do not mind us, everyone."

From the front passenger seat, Luna Francois looked back and explained innocently.

It was on occasions like these that Hal could not help but praise her worth as a vixen and actress. As a side note, Hal decided to keep secret the wavering thought of "I might as well open my mouth and see given this rare chance, right?" crossing his mind.

"Asya, you're a bit neurotic today, aren't you? What's with you?"

"N-Nothing. I just felt a pissed off to see you strangely flustered by a girl, no longer acting like an innocent boy... That reminds me."

While glaring intently at her fellow master-class witch Luna and Hal, Asya continued, "Although you are definitely two of a kind, were you ever this close? And Luna, you've changed subtly. How should I put it? It's like you're more feminine or something."

"Fufufufu. My dear hopeless Asya, do you finally feel my overflowing feminine charm?"

"W-What kind of unfunny joke are you making!?"

While playing dumb in response to Asya's inexplicably foul mood, Luna Francois calmed down the atmosphere in the car, meanwhile not forgetting to throw sultry winks at Hal from time to time.

It was probably a small skit designed to enhance a sense of camaraderie and intimacy as accomplices.

While concluding that, Hal noticed that he was surprisingly not repulsed by it.

No matter what, Luna Francois Gregory was undoubtedly an intelligent beauty. Simply conversing with her was very enjoyable already.

(Girls are truly scary...)

This was a threat he had never felt from his childhood friend.

With wariness and trepidation, Hal stole a glance at the front passenger seat. Keenly noticing his gaze, Luna Francois smiled back in response.

—The fact that he felt slightly *attracted* must remain secret too.

"Hey, is the 'Dragon Palace' you mentioned nearby?"

Asya, Orihime, Hazumi and Luna Francois—Hal did not direct his question to any of these four. The dragon ghost, whom he was posing the question to, appeared in the last row's auxiliary seat in the minivan.

Manifested as a young girl in a scarlet kimono, Hinokagutsuchi replied haughtily, "One could certainly consider it nearby—Perhaps. Possibly wandering the sea in this vicinity, possibly slumbering somewhere like a rock, one of the two."

After listening to this ambiguous answer, Hal grumbled, "Why thank you for such a precise tip."

"No need to get so hung up, Harry. There is nothing wrong with failure. Since this outing simultaneously serves as a company recreation trip to soothe our bodies that were exhausted from the intense battles earlier, why not take it easy?"

"I agree. In my case, I will take your advice. Let's relax in a sightseeing mood, shall we?"

It was Orihime supporting Luna Francois from the back seat.

She turned out to be quite good at reading the mood.

She must have used this joking tone to offer such a frivolous opinion in an attempt to alleviate Hal's anxiety.

After that, the junior student who had never gone on any trip for the past few years, let alone a beach, spoke up too.

"A bit embarrassing as it is to say, I am plenty satisfied to be able to come here already. Thank you very much, everyone, for taking me along!"

Always smiling like an angel—Shirasaka Hazumi. At this moment, the smile dominating her visage was even more dazzling than usual, looking like she really was in bliss.

After confirming this through the rear-view mirror, Hal felt extremely satisfied too.

Just to be able to see this smile, the expedition to Izu was already worth it.

Temporarily casting aside his thoughts on Luna Francois, he stepped on the gas pedal with a relaxed mood.

Gathering information first was necessary at the initial destination. The current time was a bit past 9am. Their group had set off from Tokyo New Town early in the morning to come here.

As a side note, breakfast had been eaten inside the minivan. Rice balls courtesy of Orihime.

"Haruomi, let's stop at the next station to have a second breakfast."

"Can't we just look for a burger joint or a convenience store?"

"Since we are traveling, we ought try out local ingredients and cooking, but restaurants aren't open at this hour... This kind of situation dictates going to a station's shopping area. It's quite usual for those kinds of places to open at 8am!"

"Considering you're foreigners, Luna and Asya, that level of familiarity with Japan is way too much..."

They had already made two rest stops this morning. Although Asya had bought food like hot dogs or instant noodles each time, it looked like her stomach was empty again.

In response, a third person said with a smile, "Senpai, I have the

same request. I would like us to make a stop too!"

"Sure, got it."

Following his policy of indulging Hazumi as much as possible, Hal instantly nodded.

Hence, three hours later—

Hal parked the minivan at Shimoda City in the Izu Peninsula.

The location was a certain mountainside shrine quite close to Sagaminada's shore. Since there was no parking lot nearby, Hal stopped the car on the side of the road near the red torii entrance.

Local visitors to the shrine seemed to be doing the same thing, so Hal followed suit.

This was a small shrine for which titles like "divine temple" or "grand shrine" would not apply.

Despite the shrine's diminutive size, it still had a very solemn ambiance surrounding various facilities such as the entrance approach and the worship hall. Surely, such an atmosphere could only have arisen from the dignity exhibited by a wooden structure baptized by the passage of time.

Walking along the front approach, Hal and Asya conversed.

"This place's history can be traced back to the early Kamakura period... In other words, eight centuries ago."

"But the building itself probably went through demolition and reconstruction multiple times from disasters like fire, right?"

"Even so, this shrine is still an old building with more than three hundred years of history."

As a side note, their other three witch companions were also present. However, the former dragon's ghost had disappeared despite the fact that the deity venerated at this shrine was "Fire Goddess Hinokagutsuchi."

...Five types of divine treasures related to the fire goddess were kept in the Witch Mansion at Shin-Kiba.

Last month, Hal had located the dragon king's heartmetal from among them.

Those artifacts originated from a certain ancient shrine in the Tokai region—in other words, here.

"Well then, Harry, the three of us shall go off for a bit on our own."

After seeing Luna Francois, Orihime and Hazumi off, Hal and Asya walked alone by themselves.

They were headed towards an isolated house within the shrine's premises.

It was the residence inhabited by the family of the head priest running the shrine. SAURU's Tokai branch had informed them in advance about Hal's visiting group of dragon specialists from Tokyo New Town.

After they rung the bell normally at the door, the owner of the house invited them inside.

Only two of them were making the visit because an excessive number of guests would impose unnecessarily on their host.

After greeting the middle-aged head priest who received them and engaging in ten minutes of pleasantries, Hal and Asya asked to be taken to the storehouse where the family heirloom was kept—

In front of the storehouse, Hal summoned the magic gun.

"If that *signpost* to the Dragon Palace is here, could you simply tell us more directly?"

"Unfortunately, it is not clear to me either."

From the magic gun in his right hand came Hinokagutsuchi's whisper.

The head priest in charge of showing the way had gone back, leaving the storehouse's door wide open. Only Asya remained by Hal's side. This storehouse was reportedly a building from the early Showa period. Filled with dust, the old storehouse did not offer any illumination while having a seemingly vast collection.\

Then the guardian of the magic gun said, "In the past during my reign as the Crimson Queen, the castle of my residence was located

in the sea."

"A castle in the sea—You mean something like the Dragon Palace of folklore?"

As soon as Hal chimed in, Hinokagutsuchi's voice responded.

"Mm-hmm. Nevertheless, the priestesses and shrine maidens in my service were mostly born on land. When it came time for their return to their homeland, I allowed them to take something back... It seems."

Completely unapologetic, Hinokagutsuchi's voice sounded like she was bragging triumphantly.

Hal proceeded to ask her to identify possible locations in "the sea within the vicinity" for the Dragon Palace. This caused the former queen of dragons to point along the coastlines of the Japanese islands from Kantou to the Tokai region, continuing to the waters around the Ogasawara Islands, finally extending to the Northern Mariana Islands.

For a carpet search operation, it would be quite a large area.

"With the passage of time, I lost my dragon king body and drifted to this land in spirit form... Then at a certain point in time, I heard a shrine maiden from this shrine inquire 'Goddess Hinokagutsuchi, where are you from?'—"

"Then you answered 'the Dragon Palace' as a joke?"

"I suppose. However, that group of people serving me was truly impressive. After I told them the location of the Dragon Palace's signpost, they finally found it after an arduous adventure."

"Sounds like some kind of puzzle quest."

At that moment, Asya interrupted.

"Specifically, what shape is the object?"

"Please. Why would I pay any attention to something of no use to me?"

"This kind of useless hint function would definitely elicit crappy reviews from players if it appeared in low-difficulty RPGs in recent times."

After grumbling, Hal motioned to his childhood friend with his eyes.

Boasting rare top-class power in the world, the witch instantly chanted a song of summoning.

"I pray to the ancient divine seal of purity. Send the blue wyvern to the ground."

A mysterious creature suddenly manifested over Asya's head, a wyvern.

A dragon with *wings* sprouting out of the shoulders in the place of forelimbs. A gigantic homunculus crafted in imitation of dragons. However, her wingspan was only three meters now—

Naturally, this was Blue Rushalka.

Originally a super-size creature whose body length reached ten-odd meters, she was miniaturized as much as possible by Asya before being summoned.

"Rushalka, find the artifact that gives off the scent of dragons as well as that of Hinokagutsuchi—The Crimson Queen. If necessary, use pseudo-divinity."

During the decisive battle last month, Hal and Orihime had located Hinokagutsuchi's heartmetal by relying on Akuro-Ou's sense of smell.

They were currently intending to reuse that method. In the next second, the miniaturized Rushalka obeyed Asya's request and swept her sharp gaze across the interior of the storehouse.

The blue wyvern vocalized "kyuahh..." softly.

Naturally, the interior of the storehouse was quite dim with only a small window opened near the ceiling. However, a blue glow appeared in this darkness, presumably due to Rushalka's magical power.

Guided by the light, Hal stepped into the storehouse.

Part 2

"So this is the 'signpost' Senpai and Asya-san found..."

Sitting on Hazumi's right palm was the object that the two of them had found in the storehouse during the day—

Dressed in a yukata, Hazumi was tilting her dainty head with an incredulous expression.

"What kind of object is it exactly?"

Hazumi's right hand was holding a black stone.

Almost the same size as her palm, it looked like a shard of obsidian with an irregular surface. Glowing faintly under fluorescent lighting, it had a greenish tint.

"Currently unknown. However, it's thanks to Rushalka's perception that we found this... So there shouldn't be any question that it has the scent of dragons."

"Shirasaka, you can try checking it with magical sight too."

"Oh, okay."

As expected, Hazumi nodded obediently after listening to the joint suggestion from the yukata-wearing Asya and Hal.

As a witch, currently Level 2, she was a fourteen-year-old girl. Hal watched as her expression tensed as she stared intently at the black stone.

"In that case, let me try too."

Orihime was the speaker. Likewise dressed in a yukata, she was sitting next to her cousin.

Hal and his friends were gathered in a spacious Japanese-style room inside a hotspring inn at Shimoda City near the southern tip of the Izu Peninsula. Gathered around a dining table they were currently having dinner.

Hence, Hazumi and Orihime looked at the black stone.

With a flash, their pupils turned blue. It was apparent that they had activated magical sight.

Using vision to confirm the presence or absence of magical power, its strength, its flow and various other changes. Among humans, witches and Haruga Haruomi were the only ones capable of doing this with the naked eye.

Hazumi and Orihime looked at the stone using enhanced vision. Then the two of them showed surprise simultaneously.

"Listen, Haruga-kun. Indeed, I can sense the power of magic from this stone... But it feels *extremely faint* to me."

"You too, Nee-sama? In fact, it is the same for me."

"Speaking of agreement, it's the same for Haruomi and me too. Naturally, Luna as well..."

"Yes, my appraisal had the same outcome. The magical energy hidden inside this stone can't be considered high."

The last member, Luna Francois offered her opinion.

As a side note, the girls' yukatas were designed with patterns on white backgrounds.

What differed were the patterns and the colors of their sashes. Orihime's was pale blue, Asya's was yellow, Hazumi's was pink while Luna's was navy blue. Providing colors to choose from was part of the inn's service.

"Perhaps this is an enchanted artifact that can only be activated by the right person using the right method," said Hal with a shrug.

On the large dining table before them was a sumptuous dinner.

Sashimi of several types of local fish. Abalone, conch and other shellfish in season. There was also Japanese spiny lobster served as both sashimi and roasted forms. Prepared in a small pot was sukiyaki featuring Izu beef.

Also featuring steamed red snapper and pot-cooked rice with conger eel, the menu had no blind spots to speak of.

Roughly two hours prior, after enjoying a view of the setting sun over the sea horizon, Hal and company had separated by gender for

a soak in the hot springs before meeting up for dinner.

"By the way, as a matter of fact, Hinokagutsuchi doesn't know how exactly this thing is used either."

"Perhaps sending it to SAURU headquarters or the Hawaii lab for testing might be a solution."

"Since it might become essential for our investigation here, let's wait and see before sending it away for testing. Anyway, send the observed data to Waikiki first and ask them to analyze it."

Hal's report, Asya's musing, Luna's suggestion.

After listening to the three seniors who were experienced in research, Orihime and Hazumi could not help but feel impressed.

After visiting the shrine in the afternoon, Hal's group had visited the southern Izu office of SAURU's Tokai branch to borrow several sensor devices (as a small branch in a rural area, it did not have very high-end equipment).

"Let's examine the stone tomorrow while we continue our local investigation," Hal muttered while picking up a piece of spiny lobster sashimi with his chopsticks.

"Then there's playing in the sea or water activities, beach volleyball, sunbathing, watermelon splitting, long-distance swimming, floating on a swim ring, surfing, scuba diving, barbecue—What else?"

"Haruga-kun, you seem unexpectedly excited for recreation."

"It'd be bad if you got the wrong idea about me," Hal grinned and explained to Orihime.

"Despite how I look, my goal is actually to become an adult who always uses up all my annual vacation days. No matter how tight the schedule, I must take a summer vacation. That's my conviction."

"Speaking of which, I think you fooled around in Corsica for half a month last year..."

"Simply doing as the Romans do. As an island in Europe and French territory to boot, isn't it common sense to take a vacation there?"

After answering Asya's murmurs, Hal could not help but jump in surprise.

The five of them were sitting around the dinning table with Luna Francois on his right hand side. The blonde beauty in a yukata was an abundant display of exotic charm.

With such an appearance, she suddenly leaned her body over.

Luna Francois picked up the teapot and poured green tea into Hal's cup.

"Well said. It should be quite enjoyable to recuperate here for two or three days, Harry."

"Yeah, sure."

"With Asya and I here, we will do everything we can to assist you. Relax and take a break."

"Yeah, sure."

Still to recover from his surprise, Hal could only repeat the same answer in a loop.

A floral fragrance was coming from Luna Francois at point blank range. She had apparently applied perfume after her bath. In addition, she had put on light makeup for a natural look. What feminine allure.

Hal's heart rate sped up slightly.

Luna Francois' airs, beautiful face and floral fragrance were amplifying each other in a multiplying effect.

The five of them were divided into three rooms for accommodations.

The girls had two rooms with Orihime paired with Hazumi and Asya paired with Luna Francois while Hal had a single as the only boy.

There was an electric massage chair in Hal's Japanese-style room.

The chair was currently in operation, relieving the stress from Hal's back.

"That girl Luna isn't trying to seduce me for real, is she...?"

Although the mechanical message was monotonous, it still managed to stimulate the pressure points accurately.

In fact, Hal had received Luna Francois' invitation immediately after dinner, asking if he wanted to visit the inn's relaxation corner for a massage.

After declining her, he went back to his room alone and started up the massage chair.

Instead of chasing after her escaped prey, Luna simply smiled and said, "Then I shall go alone. Accompany me next time."

Then she left Hal.

"It feels like a super focused flurry of jabs... Is she planning to weaken me continuously with light punches, biding her time for a chance to deliver a full-powered hit...?"

His entire body sunk in the massage chair, Hal contemplated Luna Francois' tactics.

Seemingly a bit convoluted, it might actually be quite a solid approach. Judging from the current situation, rashly going on the offensive in extreme ways—like "barging into Hal's home to propose marriage"—would be pushing things too forcefully. Even if she did that for real, he would only run away.

However, Luna Francois was not coercing him against his will.

Her offense consisted only of insignificant jabs, yet the effects were quite substantial.

No matter what, expressing care at such clean moments (although with ulterior motives) and proactively showing affection (although simply feigned) was making Hal feel somewhat tempted, more or less.

Despite clearly knowing it was a lie, perhaps going along with it might be a kind of happiness.

"Well, there's actually no reason why I can't accept her invitation... Although I do't know whether that could establish a vassal covenant."

Hal entertained lustful thoughts while soothing himself with the

humming vibrations.

Knock knock. There was a light knocking at the door. Hal stood up and walked to the door but could not be bothered to switch off the massage chair.

"Haruga-kun, you're inside, aren't you? May I have a word with you?"

"Juujouji?"

Orihime was standing outside the door in a yukata.

Hal immediately invited her into the room. The super popular girl, secretly called the "Princess" by other students, settled her gaze on the still-operating massage chair by the window.

"Does this feel good to sit in?"

"So-so, I guess. There's no harm giving it a try if you find yourself waking up every morning tired and lacking energy in your entire body."

"In that case, I am fine with sitting in this one."

Next to the massage chair was a completely nondescript wooden chair.

Orihime smiled cheerfully and took her seat on the chair that was not electrically powered. Hal returned to his place on the massage chair and switched it off.

"I don't mind if you continue, you know?"

"It's okay. I'm going to enjoy it for another three hours or so afterwards," answered Hal half-jokingly to Orihime being considerate.

Although a slightly unusual conversation, it was more relaxing for the body and mind than a monotonous mechanical massage. Perhaps this was because—of the fact that Orihime was by his side.

Hal's heart fluttered slightly, making him a bit uncomfortable.

Finding this change unbelievable, Orihime showed a somewhat worried expression.

"By the way, it only occurred to me when listening to you just now... Haruga-kun, are you referring to the fact that you feel tired when you get up every morning? It is not a good sign when even sleep fails to alleviate fatigue."

"Because... think about it, a lot has happened lately, right?"

"Haruga-kun, neglecting sleep and quality of meals as soon as anything comes up is your weakness. In the same situation, Asya-san would never take either of them lightly."

"That's definitely true. You make a good point."

No matter when, humans needed to eat and sleep properly.

Otherwise, the body would not be able to function as desired when caught in a perilous predicament, lacking strength where it was needed. Blessed with a strong and resilient nature of wildness, Asya had been adhering to this principle subconsciously the whole time.

While the conversation was striking a deep chord within Hal, Orihime said to him, "By the way, for a while now, I have been a bit curious about the matter of rising from bed... Isn't Hazumi frequently going over to wake you up, Haruga-kun?"

"Yeah. She comes with unexpected frequency."

"To be honest... I was considering this from the start whether I should be going along with her."

"Huh!?"

Hal was stunned by Orihime's shy reveal.

He could not help but start imagining: in addition to the adorable underclassman, even her older cousin was by his pillow, waking him up from bed—Surely, that would bring about an even greater sense of bliss, resulting in more brain matter secretions than from just Hazumi alone.

"However, after that battle against Princess Yukikaze, the time we have been spending together... have become quite lengthy, after all."

"Now that you mention it, that seems to be true."

In June, an intense battle had taken place against Princess Yukikaze

and her minion—Genbu-Ou.

As frontline combatants during the whole conflict, Hal and Orihime had to frequently rush all over New Town to handle aftermath matters. Not only that, whenever the two of them were together in the same space—

Hal would subconsciously approach Orihime.

Conversely, Orihime would frequently walk over to his side as soon as she saw him.

As for the reason why, neither of the two of them could articulate it clearly, but if anything—it was probably because it felt delightful spending time together.

"Hence... When I was considering whether or not to accompany Hazumi to your house in the morning, Haruga-kun, I suddenly felt afraid. I did not know if you might find... me *annoying* or similar by your side—That worried me somewhat. After all, we have really spent so much time together lately..."

"Of course not. I'll definitely be very happy if you came too, Juujouji."

"But it would also be weird to be together too frequently..."

"Nothing of that sort, I think. I suppose it'd be better if you came with her. Yeah."

"R-Really?"

"Yup. I can swear to heaven if you want."

"Starting with the second term, if the opportunity presents itself... May I come together with Hazumi?"

"Of course."

Interacting with a blushing and slightly flustered Orihime was quite rare.

For some reason, it felt very comfortable yet bittersweet. Hal found it unbelievable. Clearly whenever he was together with girls, encountering heart-racing moments for him was equivalent to being subjected to Luna's "attacks."

However, he felt very contented right now.

Neither unsettled nor was there any inexplicable unease. Could it be that in Orihime's case, there was a sense of trust that did not require him to interpret and analyze every word and action?

"Or perhaps, if it is permissible—"

There was no need for formalities with Orihime, so Hal said, "Tomorrow morning is perfectly fine too."

"W-What are you talking about? Weird rumors would start if I were to visit a boy's room to play during a trip. And not to mention with Hazumi too!"

"Now that you mention it, Juujouji—"

Confronted with his slightly flustered female classmate, Hal could not help but offer his view.

"Aren't you here in my room on your own right now?"

"Good... point... I can't believe I did not notice that..."

"Besides, this isn't a school trip or anything like that. There's no reason for people in school to know, right?"

"Now that you mention it, that is true indeed..."

"....."

"....."

Their gazes meeting from up close, the two of them fell silent at the same time.

The shy Orihime was slightly fidgeting uncomfortably while Hal also displayed some embarrassment. Accidentally going with the flow of the mood just now, he had said something without thinking.

That being said, before his eyes right now, Orihime was currently so shy that she kept her head bowed.

This posture was quite rare given how fearlessly she usually conducted herself. If he had to find an example, this would be similar to during Akuro-Ou's birth ritual, when Hal had used his right hand to pour magical power into her heart—engaging in an

awful act of contact...

Recalling that ended up causing the pounding in Hal's heart to intensify.

Not only that, he was currently on a trip in the same room, as well as being alone with Orihime to boot—The beating in his chest kept accelerating like an alarm.

At this moment, Orihime suddenly looked up, gazing at Hal with eyes of uncertainty.

"E-Excuse me, Haruga-kun—"

"Uh, about the earlier suggestion, I guess never mind. Think about it, if Asya and Luna finds out you and Shirasaka are running over to my room, they might complain that we're behaving inappropriately on a business trip."

"R-Really?"

"Y-Yeah."

Hal retracted his earlier statement out of cowardice, but elicited an unexpected reaction. Parting her lips slightly, Orihime spoke timidly, "In that case, I-I could come alone, you know...?"

"Huh?"

"Compared to two people, it's less likely for one person to be discovered. I will secretly get up earlier and come to your room directly, Haruga-kun, then going back immediately. That should be fine, right...?"

"A-Are you serious?"

"That is what I am thinking..."

"Then for tomorrow morning, I'll be counting on you..."

"R-Really? Understood. Tomorrow... I will disturb you a little while evading detection as much as possible..."

" " " "

After reaching a consensus, the two of them made eye contact again.

Orihime's face was red beyond compare. Hal suspected his own face to have the same expression. With an unbelievable and bittersweet atmosphere hanging in the room with the two of them alone, Hal felt that the beating in his chest was not going to subside any time in the near future.

"Th-Then even if you feel sleep-deprived because I came to rouse you, no complaining, okay?"

"Th-That goes without saying."

"Definitely keep the room unlocked, okay...?"

"I'll make sure everything is in place."

The conversation sounded almost like they were arranging for a tryst.

This was a first experience for Hal, so feeling embarrassed could not be avoided. Orihime was probably feeling the same.

As a result, she changed the subject somewhat abruptly.

"B-By the way, Haruga-kun, our current task is to locate the castle in the sea that used to serve as Kagutsuchi-san's residence, isn't it? Just like the Dragon Palace."

"Yeah, that's right. It's where she lived when she was still a dragon king."

Hal hastily switched his mind back to business mode.

This was information told to them personally by Hinokagutsuchi at the poolside reception a few days ago.

'One of my dragonslaying runes, the Rune of the Bow, is currently in your hand, brat... As for the other one, it might still be lying dormant in my castle of old.'

'That rune was put away as a reserve weapon?'

'It would not be incorrect to say that. Well, it would be amusing if you went on a search for it, though I know not whether you will succeed.'

After listening to Hal's question, Hinokagutsuchi had smiled malevolently.

After that, Hal had spent a little time organizing the various clues randomly given out by the former dragon's ghost. The conclusion he reached through careful deductions was to go on an actual search.

Hal cleared his throat, put on as serious a face as he could and started to recount.

"Although it is currently still unclear how many centuries the Crimson Queen lived as a dragon king, what is certain is that she was alive roughly eight hundred years ago, in other words, the early Kamakura period. The Queen apparently considered her territory to be what modern Japan calls the East China Sea, the Sea of Japan, the Sea of Okhotsk, and the west end of the Pacific Ocean—the waters where the Kuroshio Current passes through."

"Territory... as in sphere of influence?"

"Speaking of which, Princess Yukikaze also mentioned that she had 'never held territory on earth before.'"

A term used for the domain under a dragon king's or a Tyrannos' rule—Territory.

Hal could still recall vividly how Tokyo New Town had become Princess Yukikaze's "territory" last month. Far away in North America's New York State, the island of Manhattan was the castle of the dragon king Red Hannibal, his "territory" in other words.

"Although the Crimson Queen seldom appeared before humans, those fortunate enough to catch a glimpse of her and her minions treated them as 'deities' to revere and worship. Having enjoyed treatment as a deity, the Queen continued pretending to be a goddess even after turning into a ghost, arbitrarily issuing orders and playing mischief on the people frequenting the shrine during the daytime."

"The Dragon Palace of a great queen of dragonkind... It seems quite interesting. Moreover—"

Orihime snickered.

"Didn't Kagutsuchi-san mention it before? That Dragon Palace is still wandering in the ocean, practically like a mobile castle. I would really love to see it for myself."

"It also raises the question of what serves as a power source to drive

something as gigantic as a castle."

After chiming in with his comment, Hal began to think deeply.

On the low table in front of the massage chair was Hal's cellphone and the black stone.

An uneven surface, a color similar to obsidian with a slight tint of green.

Hal suddenly recalled something. What he had witnessed once recently—the sight of "a gigantic entity resembling a castle" moving arbitrarily over the sea. Indeed, it was quite similar to this black stone...

"Call Asya and Luna over. I've thought of something."

Part 3

It was the second day of the trip for Hal and company. Fortunately, the weather was quite since morning.

The sky was very blue, the clouds were very white, and the sun was very dazzling.

A sunny day in summer was a matter-of-fact symbol of intense heat, but Hal and company were planning to go to the beach in the first place, so hotter weather would make for greater enjoyment. Ignoring the blinding sunlight, the group boarded a minivan early in the morning to arrive at a small bay after a full hour of driving.

A deliberate choice to avoid spacious seaside swimming destinations, they had picked a remote beach instead.

Combined with the two additional factors of it being a weekday as well as the very beginning of summer holidays, the ensuing result was—

"It's much less crowded than imagined! The sea is so pretty too!"

Pointing at the sea, Hazumi could not help but get excited.

Compared to the familiar Tokyo Bay, this navy-blue sea stretched vastly before their eyes.

The beach's sand was also very white. Bathed under the morning sunlight, things heated up all at once. As a beach with only ten-odd visitors who looked like locals, the location was quite perfect. After getting changed at the only beach house, they immediately went to play in the water.

"I suppose I shall go rent one of those."

What had caught Luna Francois' eye was a personal watercraft.

Two of them were available at the beach house for rent. In addition, swim rings, banana boats, parasols and other equipment could be rented.

"If you like, Harry, how about sitting behind me?"

"Uh, I..."

"Fufu. Just give me a shout any time if that's what you want!"

Sitting in tandem on a jet ski in close skin contact with Luna Francois...

Moreover, she was wearing a very revealing swimsuit—Hal was rendered speechless by his imagination of the scene. Luna smiled impishly at him then returned to the beach house, presumably to complete rental procedures.

Hal could not help but sigh in relief. While he was looking at the swim rings, Orihime walked over.

"Haruga-kun, are you a good swimmer?"

"If not drowning counts as being good, I guess. How about you?"

"In truth, I can't win against the girls in the swimming team."

"Meaning you can win against everyone else, right...? As expected of a perfect superhuman blessed with athletic ability and a fulfilling life."

"I don't quite understand but are you complimenting me? Fufu, thank you."

The girl, who had visited his room this morning as promised, smiled and replied.

Orihime had gently shaken Hal by the shoulder while whispering "Haruga-kun, it's morning" into his ear. After that, she had waited patiently by his bedside for as long as ten minutes until Hal woke up thoroughly.

Then using tea leaves and a teapot prepared ahead of time, she brewed a pot of green tea for Hal before leaving discreetly.

Despite this happening earlier, the two of them were now conversing normally as though nothing had happened.

But with a rising feeling of mischief as accomplices, Hal and Orihime could not help but burst out laughing at the same time.

Left in the dark on the side, Hazumi jumped in surprise. Hal hastily spoke to his junior, "Shirasaka, how's your swimming?"

"For around twenty meters, probably the same as you, Senpai, I can avoid drowning, but I'm not confident if the distance is greater than that..."

The younger student, as pure as an angel, confessed the truth shyly. She was definitely not strong in health and always had to sit out PE class in an observing role.

In spite of that, Hazumi clenched her fist and expressed her determination.

"But this summer, I hope to improve further."

"I guess this'll be indispensable as a tool to aid your training, Shirasaka."

Hence, Hal rented two swim rings, giving one to Hazumi and one for himself respectively.

Also, everyone had finished changing and were all in swimsuits.

Luna Francois' was black while Orihime had a white bikini with a pareo. Both looks had been revealed at the swimming pool reception last time.

The blonde American girl's bikini was decorated with lace.

Combined with Luna Francois' original airs like an antique doll's, her seductive charm was fully on display at the beach here.

Meanwhile, Orihime was wearing a bikini with a simple and casual design.

Perhaps because she not only gave off a well-bred young lady's airs but also bore an expression of upstanding moral character and approachability, the swimsuit was an especially good match for this Japanese girl.

Truly two young beauties standing in stark contrast.

Not only that, but their figures were also outstanding. Described as closeted by his own admission, Hal naturally felt an indescribable sense of fulfillment after seeing Orihime and Luna's gorgeous appearances from close range.

But today, apart from Orihime and Luna, Hazumi was dressed in swimwear too.

Using a UV-cut parka as a wrap, she was wearing a simple lime-colored bikini with frills sewn on the edges. Exceptionally cute.

Noticing Hal's gaze, Hazumi squirmed in embarrassment.

"Umm... I look weird after all, right?"

"No, it's not weird at all. Why do you ask?"

"Because this is my first time wearing this type of swimsuit... I accidentally bought it after the salesperson recommended it, but afterwards, it felt more and more embarrassing..."

This type of swimsuit—She was probably referring to the bikini.

Hal tilted his head, thinking it was good precisely because it was "this type of swimsuit."

Last time when they were face to face in the female bathroom at school, Hazumi had wrapped herself in a towel. Compared to that time, today's swimsuit had even less fabric. In terms of bare skin, it was a dramatic power up.

Furthermore, although Hal had sensed it vaguely, he was finally able to confirm beyond a doubt.

Second year of middle school. Fourteen years old. Nevertheless, the bulge of her chest and the roundness of her posterior were definitely not flat even if they were a bit restrained. Rather, it would be better to describe their presence as aptly expressed.

It was unknown whether she would reach the same level as her older cousin Orihime in two years' time, but her potential had undoubtedly begun to bloom.

Faced with Hazumi *whose figure was excellent for an eighth grader*, Hal said, "Despite how I may look, I'm actually very closeted, which is why I make this assertion: simply seeing you in a swimsuit, Shirasaka, has made this trip to the beach totally worth it. So please don't call your appearance 'weird'—"

"Excuse me, Haruga-kun, please do not make bizarre comments in front of Hazumi!"

"Sh-Should I be saying thanks in this kind of situation, Nee-sama...?"

"Hazumi too, stop accepting Haruga-kun's closeted perversion so

obediently!"

While Orihime was lecturing Hal on his tactlessness and her cousin for being swayed, their last companion finally exited the beach house. Namely, Asya.

"Thanks for waiting, everyone... Because preparations took some time and effort."

The beautiful fairy-like girl was speaking with a rare tone of eloquence.

Her expression was sharp with a stern gaze. Such were the vibes exuded from her entire body that it would not be surprising even if she were to fight a dragon immediately. Extremely gallant.

Of course, Asya was also in a swimsuit. The blue bikini top had vertical stripes while the bottom piece was designed like a pair of shorts.

Speaking of the lines of her figure, Asya's were essentially quite gentle in undulation.

Even so, it was not a completely flat line. The curves illustrated by her breathtakingly slender body were quite well-suited to a teenage girl's low-key body, instead adding a tempting sense of allure.

That being said, Asya's swimsuit look embodied a warrior's vigor instead of cuteness.

Devoured by overwhelming tension, Orihime and Hazumi fell silent. Immediately, Hal was certain that this atmosphere stemmed from the *harpoon* held in his childhood friend's hand.

"Cooking is best when local ingredients are used after all. And you guys are in lock today, because apart from magic and combat, I've been praised for my free-diving and harpoon skills too. I've already prepared traditional Japanese cooking implements—a portable clay stove and charcoal flames. Let's have a seafood party for lunch today!"



"Asya, free-dive fishing is prohibited by law in these waters."

"What did you say!?"

In the majority of Japanese prefectures, it was forbidden for ordinary people without fishing rights to catch marine life using harpoons or fishing nets. Simply walking on the shore with such equipment in your hands would be enough to get scolded by fishermen, so please be careful.

Although marine hunting was stopped, there were still plenty of recreation activities by the sea.

Hal and Hazumi floated on swim rings amid marine-blue waves while Orihime and Asya swam leisurely on the side.

Especially Hal's childhood friend with her boundless energy that had nowhere to vent.

With speed and fluidity rivaling sea nymphs or mermaids, she was able to move effortlessly and nimbly whether on the surface or underwater. Apart from free-diving, she was also very skilled in ordinary swimming.

In addition, Luna Francois was currently riding a jet ski, racing across the sea.

Wearing a pair of sunglasses, she was handling the watercraft magnificently with experienced hand and body motions. Let alone automobiles, the Trans-Pacific Shootdown Ace was apparently skilled in operating all kinds of transportation.

Luna was riding her jet ski in dashing manner.

Hazumi and Orihime also took turns riding the back seat, enjoying the thrill of speeding across the sea.

Meanwhile, Asya and Hal went ashore and strolled along the beach.

"It's almost noon. Let's acquire ingredients for a seafood party without catching fish ourselves."

Walking along the shore side by side, Asya asked, "Any suggestions?"

"Go check out local markets nearby and see if you can purchase leftover seafood on a retail basis. Then go find a fisherman, who operates a small boat on his own, or his wife and ask them to sell us what they've caught this morning."

"Understood. What are your plans next, Haruomi?"

"As much as I'd like to avoid it, I do have work to do. By the way, where's the stone?"

"I've been carrying it with me properly. After all, it's still being *tested*."

Asya took out a transparent plastic pouch containing the unidentified black stone as well as her purse and cellphone.

After parting ways with his childhood friend, Hal walked to the beach house.

He took out a laptop from his belongings in the locker then walked over to a parasol he had just rented and sat down cross-legged on a beach chair.

"Looks like you have discerned that stone's true identity."

"Rather than discern, it's more like a hunch building on Asya and Luna's ideas after I asked for their opinion. Don't tell me that this thing isn't part of a dragon's body?"

Hinokagutsuchi's figure manifested in the unoccupied beach chair beside him.

In addition, the former dragon queen was wearing a red bikini. This was the same swimsuit she had worn at the pool reception last time. While Hinokagutsuchi was reclining on the chair, Hal said to her, "It should be a related species if it's not a dragon. A 'serpent' for example—a leviathan. Apart from that, among your minions, there are some that fit the criteria."

"Oh?"

"Like Princess Yukikaze's minion, Genbu-Ou. Speaking of which, if you chipped a piece off that crazy big shell and scattered the fragments... They'll probably take this kind of form."

This stone fragment, resembling obsidian, had been found inside a shrine's storeroom.

Its uneven surface glowed green very faintly. This color was quite similar to the turtle shell of that super organism, Genbu-Ou, the hundred-meter-long giant chelonian creature and Princess Yukikaze's minion.

"Earlier, I made this association after recalling that giant turtle," said Hal while sneaking a glance at Hinokagutsuchi beside him.

Despite the appearance of a young girl, she was reclining arrogantly with her legs crossed.

"Genbu-Ou too is a humongous creature like an island, capable of swimming freely in the ocean, right? Furthermore, back in ancient China, there were legends of holy beasts such as sacred chelonians,

including a gigantic turtle that carried a mountain on top of its carapace."

The gigantic turtle carrying Mount Penglai—Legends of sacred turtles were not unique to China.

The Korean peninsula and Japan had similar stories, intricately connecting to one another across the ocean that the Crimson Queen had made her *territory* eight hundred years ago.

This applied to the story of Urashima Tarou too. Ever since antiquity, turtles had served as guides to the Dragon Palace (a castle in the sea hidden from the world). This excessively famous fairy tale protagonist was called "Urashima no Ko" in ancient times and actually had quite antiquated literary records in the *Chronicles of Japan* and the *Collection of Myriad Leaves*.

The *Chronicles of Japan* contained the following description: "Mizue no Urashima no Ko went to Mount Penglai together with a woman who had transformed from a giant turtle"...

Hal calmly put his academic prowess on display and concluded, "Consequently, the following is purely my own speculation: The Dragon Palace mentioned in these legends is actually the same kind of turtle monster as Genbu-Ou. Perhaps there might even be a castle on top of an insanely large carapace. This turtle used to be your minion whereas the black stone and so-called signpost is a part of the turtle shell—"

"Kukuku. Not a bad idea, that is all I can say."

"Asya said this too. In the past, you and Princess Yukikaze... It makes her want to investigate what effect the dragon kings a thousand years ago had on legends of this type, that was what she mentioned before."

Hal recounted to Hinokagutsuchi who was smiling malevolently.

Just earlier, he had heard from Asya that the research theme of "a study on the effects imparted upon dragon and serpent legends around the world by the existence of dragonkind" had already been started a while ago.

That being said, she had also spent a substantial amount of time obsessively on strange training—

"Based on this hunch, I decided to look for relevant clues. Can I ask you not to disturb me in the meantime?"

"Understood. Do your best. Hmph."

Thus, Hinokagutsuchi vanished with a sneer. Sitting on the beach chair, Hal opened his laptop. All the ancient texts and reference materials about the shrine where Goddess Hinokagutsuchi was worshiped had already been digitized and saved into the hard drive.

After reading these materials for an hour, Hal suddenly noticed.

At some point in time, someone had sat down on the adjacent beach chair. Someone familiar.

Showing off her extravagant proportions in a black bikini, the blonde beauty was Luna Francois, of course.

Part 4

"You finally noticed me, Harry."

Smiling sweetly, Luna Francois greeted Hal, making him feel slightly intimidated.

"W-When did you arrive?"

"Seven minutes and thirty-two seconds ago. I deliberately kept quiet because you looked like you were concentrating. However, Harry, it was not boring because I had a good long look at your serious countenance, fufu," said Luna Francois with effortless readiness.

Hal felt his heart flutter again. Indeed, she was very attractive, but it was also true that this pounding of his heart was mixed with a certain subtle unease.

Her affections could very well be a display made on strategic considerations at most.

While the image of his black-haired classmate inexplicably surfaced, Hal shrugged and said, "I think there's actually no point in this kind of skit. You have ulterior motives and I am well aware of it, so it feels like more of a turn-off."

"I never thought you'd be this impatient, Harry. The game is still in the opening stage, you know?"

Luna Francois' reply was slightly taunting.

"Our battle is just about to begin. Besides, the serialization has not been scheduled to end yet. Spectacular events and developments will be unfolding one after another next, so please look forward to them."

"No, you're just playing coquette with me."

Without intending to denounce her, Hal simply refuted her calmly.

"In truth, you don't plan on giving me a taste of anything real. You're just trying to use me and string me along with hopes of good things that might happen. As soon as I demand a reward you'll surely finesse your way out of it to escape."

Hers was akin to a certain Japanese beauty's signature talent in deceiving a third-generation gentleman thief named after his grandfather of French nationality. However, Luna Francois frowned with displeasure at Hal's accusation (this was probably an act).

"Well, what an awful thing to say. On what basis are you asserting this?"

"A conclusion drawn from the statistical results of a verbal survey. I've heard from Asya about you. She's already witnessed scenes of you rejecting guys on no less than dozens of occasions. You never date anyone, not even with a mindset of playing around. When I posed the same question to acquaintances at SAURU, everyone gave the exact same answer."

"I'm impressed, Harry. In terms of the thoroughness of our methods, we are definitely quite alike."

Luna Francois stood up suddenly from her chair.

She walked over to Hal, bringing the two of them extremely close. The American maiden's beautiful face and wondrous body was right before his eyes.

Then she stood there while Hal sat cross-legged on his beach chair.

This relative positioning established a certain situation. Two massive round bulges were in front of Hal's face, announcing their presence, emphasizing their alluring volume that rivaled cantaloupes, not to mention suppleness and elasticity that could not possibly be found in any type of fruit.

Furthermore, Luna Francois was slowly crossing her arms in front of her chest.

As though using her arms to raise her bust, it seemed especially intentional during times like these.

"Indeed, I, Luna Francois Gregory, might be a cold-hearted woman without any interest in boys. Perhaps I am a cruel woman who derives pleasure from mercilessly rejecting boys who fall in love with me. However—"

Luna lifted her arms lightly and lowered them again. As a result, Hal witnessed it.

That instant when those two round and heavy objects shook with a wobble—

"Doesn't there exist a possibility where even someone like me could be swooned by your manliness and seriously fall in love when interrogated by you, Harry, with your meticulous intelligence gathering? What do you think?"

"No, I don't think so. After all, I'm not manly at all."

"A game of love is merely a cover story for hiding embarrassment. As a tsundere girl unable to express her affection honestly, my only choice is to make advances on you by using that type of excuse... How about this interpretation?"

"Unrealistic and unconvincing."

"I... really like you. Do you think I'm lying?"

"Yes, totally a lie."

Repeatedly, he refuted her cleanly and decisively.

Luna Francois stared at Hal with a smile then said, "Then here is my final question. Is your heart pounding right now?"

"N-No. Absolutely none of that. Japanese people don't lie."

"Fufu. Although we are birds of a feather, Harry, there are aspects where we're unlike. For example, I am evidently the better liar."

"....."

Hal had been able to refute Luna resolutely until now.

However, his defenses were crushed at the very end. Involuntarily, his gaze kept chasing after those wobbling female weapons in front of him. Gradually, he became unable to ignore that devastating power.

"By the way, personally, I intend to enjoy this game patiently," said Luna with a smile while maintaining her posture with her arms framing her bosom.

"The difficulty level seems higher than I'd imagined, so I shall get serious. Sure enough, the motivation becomes completely different when there is a distinct rival."

"R-Rival?"

"Yes. Speaking of which, Asya is merely your childhood friend and can be dismissed completely. However, Hazumi-san's potential cannot be underestimated and more importantly, there is Orihime-san."

"You're saying Juujouji is your rival?"

"This is the reason. Although I only caught a slight glimpse, wasn't the mood between you two quite excellent last night? Seriously, Harry, I can't believe you said something like that to Orihime-san."

"D-Don't get the wrong idea. Juujouji and I are only... only..."

How to express the sense of comfort from that time?

Hal shook his head in a dilemma, but was immediately confronted with a different question—Why would Luna Francois know about his conversation with Orihime last night?

Perhaps reading the doubt in his mind, the blonde witch smiled.

"Allow me to reveal the answer. I was actually just baiting you for confirmation, because the mood between you two felt a bit suspicious last night."

"Ehhhh!?"

"So there we have it. I still haven't revealed my entire hand to you yet, Harry. Hence, this game will begin in earnest next. Let us enjoy ourselves together thoroughly, okay?"

"....."

"Of course, I do have some delectable treats lined up for you."

Say whatever you want, but talk is cheap.

Despite thinking that, Hal could not tear his eyes away from the two round and full objects before his eyes.

"Girls are definitely scary."

"Despite saying that, your foolish susceptibility to her charms is written on your face..."

While Hal was muttering poignantly to himself, Hinokagutsuchi manifested and mocked him.

The location was the lobby on the ground floor of a hot spring inn. In this spacious public area, the two of them were sitting on a bench in the corner. Incidentally, the inn's reception desk was also here.

The inn's basic concept was "Japanese" but the interior decor was not executed in pure classical Japanese style.

The building was constructed using steel-reinforced concrete. Half of the rooms were western while the other half were Japanese. All washrooms had western toilet seats with electronic bidets installed. Everywhere had modern interior decoration with comfort as a priority.

The current location would be analogous to a western hotel's entrance hall.

"Can't be helped. I'm a guy after all."

While staring at his laptop, scanning through materials, Hal retorted.

"It's only normal for men to conceal a lustful nature worth a dozen lechers or two, right?"

"In that case, you should put it into action more boldly. However, if you were to attack openly, that little girl will simply feign compliance, create a diversion and escape."

"Figures, a queen like you thinks so too?"

"Mm-hmm. By the way, I would handle girls of that sort by pinning them down by force directly. Through slightly forceful measures, I would impress upon them a queen's dignity and tender affection, causing them to submit from the bottom of their hearts, thereby joining the ranks of my priestesses—"

"Good grief, how much sexual harassment did you commit in the past!?"

Always dressed in a scarlet kimono in the past, Hinokagutsuchi was currently wearing the inn's yukata. The fabric's pattern and the color of the sash were both in brilliant scarlet.

Facing the former dragon that used to be known as the Crimson Queen, Hal asked, "By the way, were all your targets girls?"

"That goes without saying. As if anyone would make a move on squalid men."

"Were they all humans in race?"

"Fufufu. And what if they were?"

"Nothing much. You promised to cooperate with my information gathering as much as possible, right?"

"I am willing to answer truthfully if your questions are motivated by the spirit of research without a shred of lustful intentions. If your intention is to simply listen to salacious gossip, then I am not obliged to respond. Is that clear?"

"....."

"Despite the shrewd airs you normally put on, to think that you failed to negotiate or strike a bargain when encountering such a situation. You are too pathetic, brat."

After making a fool out of Hal, Hinokagutsuchi suddenly changed the subject.

"By the way, aren't you searching for clues for the remainder of the investigation? Why did you select this location? Wouldn't shutting yourself away in a quiet location be better?"

"As for that, think about it this way."

Taking his gaze off the laptop screen, Hal looked into the depths of the corridor.

"It's not every day that all of us are at a hot spring, but regrettably, I cannot enter the female bath. However, perhaps a major incident might happen in the female bath, such as a fire or a guest suddenly taking ill. I am waiting here for unexpected situations of that sort."

Hal answered solemnly with a serious face.

"It would be excusable for me to enter the female bath completely naturally as a guy if it's because an emergency demands that I arrive to the rescue immediately. If Juujouji, Shirasaka or Luna happened to be in the bath at the time—Ah, undoubtedly the

creation of precious memories. And currently, the girls are all taking a bath."

"Wishful thinking, fool."

"But without action, nothing would begin at all. I'm gambling on that 1% probability."

No matter how closeted in his desires, Hal still carried a gentleman's pride.

Criminal intentions such as voyeurism were nonexistent. The current approach was an idea he had racked his brain to come up with while allowing his own desires and social morals to coexist, but—

"So that is how it is, I understand now."

Hinokagutsuchi put on a solemn expression and whispered, "Simply stated, you are the type of man who turns into an idiot whenever women are involved."

Part 5

"Then this is from the body of a creature that's the same type as Minadzuki and the others!?"

"More precisely, it should be a body sample from a leviathan's close relative—a creature belonging to the same lineage as Genbu-Ou, Princess Yukikaze's minion," explained Asya to the wide-eyed Hazumi.

They were currently bathing in the open-air bath.

Asya lifted her right hand in the water, holding the black stone.

"Indeed, it is quite similar in color as that giant monster last month."

Orihime nodded. Naturally, she was in the open-air bath as well.

"By the way, is it really fine to bring that stone into the bath? Isn't it quite important? I feel that it might be better to keep it in a safe or something..."

"Don't worry, this is part of the experiment," Asya explained to the visibly worried Orihime.

"It's said that a priestess or shrine maiden who had been serving Hinokagutsuchi returned to her hometown on land with this stone in her possession, so I wanted to try doing the same thing."

"Doing the same thing?"

"That's right. Since it's an item used by an ancient shrine maiden, chances are high that I'll be able to use it as a fellow practitioner of magic. That's why I've been keeping it on me everywhere I go for the time being, observing to see what properties it has. Apart from that, I've also poured magical power into it from time to time."

"Then Asya, have you learned anything from it?" Sitting on the edge of the bath, Luna Francois asked.

Apart from Hinokagutsuchi, all the girls participating in the expedition were present.

The location was the large public open-air bath belonging to a seaside hot spring inn. Built by taking full advantage of the shore's geography, it was a hot spring with excellent scenery offering a view of Sagaminada while bathers soaked themselves in the hot water.

The current time was only slightly after 3pm because they had entered the bath immediately after returning from the beach.

Since the inn's check-in time for today had only just started, there were no guests at the hot spring and open-air bath. It was as though Asya and the girls had the entire place reserved for themselves.

Naturally, all four of them were naked.

Facing Luna Francois, who was showing off her extravagantly outstanding body in the nude, Asya replied, "No major discoveries yet. If nothing else, at least it's very hard."

"Have you tested it in some way?"

"Yes, I've smashed this stone fragment against concrete as a test. Supposing it really is a body sample from a species closely related to dragonkind, this level of impact should leave it completely unharmed."

As predicted, the result of the experiment was that the concrete shattered instead.

The black stone showed no damage at all. Luna Francois smiled wryly in exasperation after listening to Asya's report.

"You're appalling, Asya, still violent as ever. If Harry or I were at the scene, we probably would've stopped you."

"I think so too, which is why I did it alone."

Asya casually dismissed her fellow witch's opinion with a carefree expression.

Ever since she heard the hypothesis proposed by her childhood friend, Asya had been very certain that it was the correct answer. A master witch's intuition allowed her to sense from this stone a presence similar to that super organism—Genbu-Ou.

That being said, it was ultimately nothing more than intuition.

There was no proof.

However, Asya's true strength was precisely the fact that she trusted intuition unquestioningly and took action.

During deadly predicaments in battles against dragons with the odds stacked heavily against her, what else could she trust apart from intuition? Although not to the point of conviction, Asya was definitely aware of this mindset. This sixth sense, which had saved Anastasya Rubashvili on countless battlefields, was demonstrating its power on this occasion too.

However, Luna Francois smiled impishly.

"As expected of your style, Asya. Although a bit unrefined for a girl, it's very dependable. I love it, you know?"

"U-Unrefined?"

"Yes, unrefined. Or you could call it rough-and-ready too."

"You should use the description 'undertaking bold action while guided by instinct' instead! A-All things considered, please don't pick on small details like this to criticize me like I'm disqualified as a girl!"

Asya could not help but get worked up, standing up forcefully in the open-air bath.

Completely forgetting the fact that she was currently soaking herself in a bath, she exposed her fairy-like body from the knees upwards.

—If anything, one had no choice but to admit that she was far surpassed by Luna and Orihime on the aspects of volume and curves. Regrettably, she might even be inferior to the fourteen-year-old Hazumi. Indeed, she was painfully aware of reality's harshness.

In spite of that, Asya remained deeply confident.

Isn't this... Rather, this should be quite an attractive figure, right?

Unlike the flat and juvenile figures one could find anywhere, she was slim and trim with a suitably bulging chest (applying rather loose standards, of course). The various parts of the body represented by BWH measurements traced out subtle curves, exhibiting dangerous maidenly beauty in the form of nudity.

Look, this could be considered a fine example of sexiness, thought Asya proudly.

As a side note, she had gotten a good amount of sun today at the beach. As a Caucasian, Asya's complexion was pale and clear to begin with, turning bronze instead of a dark tan even with exposure to sunlight.

Not a fiery-red as though scorched or burned, but a color akin to polished metal.

The only exceptions, remaining pale, were the parts that her swimsuit had covered.

"Jeez... I was going to say I've already registered the super popular maiden's trademark of the 'tanned mermaid' for today. Luna, you're totally slandering me with your comments."

"Indeed, Asya-san's tan is very pretty," said Hazumi with a smile while watching Asya complain with arms akimbo.

"So beautiful. I'm jealous of you."

"Why thank you. Hazumi-san, you are a good girl as always~"

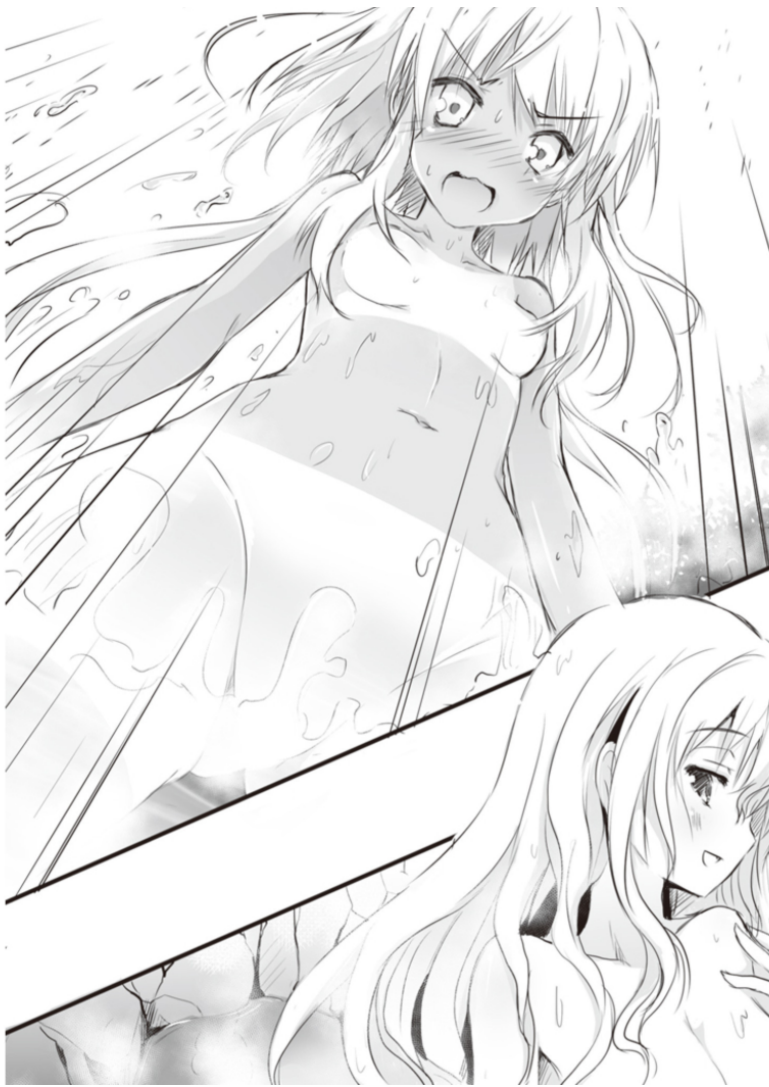
Listening to the innocent junior's praises, Asya instantly felt better.

Hazumi's cousin, Orihime, also smiled cheerfully and said, "However, Asya-san's vibes changed after receiving a tan. It's rare to see girls like that nowadays. It's very striking."

"My oh my, Orihime-san, don't you go flattering me too~"

While replying in modesty, Asya happily puffed out her rather thin chest.

"Oh dear, I suppose it's only natural for a girl like me to be striking when walking in the streets... Even though it's not my intention to draw attention, no helping it."



"That could very well be true. Skin-whitening is currently fashionable, so everyone is avoiding suntans."

"Oh, skin-whitening... *Bi-ha-ku*?" Asya froze after repeating Orihime's words.

Hazumi then said, "Apparently, people involved in athletic clubs at our school have been applying a ton of sunscreen during outdoor club activities. On the other hand, I find girls with tans to be cooler..."

The junior witch, who did not seem very athletic, stared at Asya with admiration in her face.

"That's why I find your current look very cool, Asya-san. Fufufu."

"Th-Thank you... *Bihaku*—Be hacked?"

"By the way, Asya-san, are you sure it's okay for you to enter the bath directly like this? From what I heard, dipping yourself in hot water shortly after tanning is very painful, isn't it?"

"Oh no, I've never experienced that ever in my life..."

Evidently, due to excellent skin health, she had never been troubled by problems of that type.

Hazumi widened her eyes after hearing Asya's answer.

"Really!? Every time I expose myself under the sun, I get red skin and even a fever sometimes—I'm quite jealous now."

"Hazumi frequently wears long sleeves even in the summer."

Orihime's comment triggered memories to surface in Asya's mind.

Before heading to the beach today, Hazumi and Luna Francois had applied sunscreen all over their bodies. Not only that, they had also reapplied it many times during the day.

Looking back, Asya now realized it was diligent labor for defending their skin's whiteness.

Thanks to that, Hazumi and Luna's skin had remained pale as always despite spending a long time at the beach.

In contrast, Orihime had not taken the issue as seriously as the other two.

Suitably tanned, her body was visible under the highly transparent hot water. Slender with outstanding curves, her nude body exhibited a lovely olive complexion.

Orihime had always given off vibes like some kind of "well-bred princess."

At the same time, there was also an element of sportiness and healthy beauty.

However, Orihime had definitely applied sunscreen once to avoid sunburns. Currently, she was engaging Hazumi in this kind of

dialogue...

"Excuse me, Nee-sama, may I borrow some of your shampoo later...?"

"Sure, but why?"

"When traveling, Nee-sama, you always bring a set of your toiletries from home, right?"

"Yes, because the ones provided at hotels and public baths are sometimes business-use brands of lower quality... On that subject, the bathroom here is a bit questionable."

"N-Not to the point of questionable, but my hair is sticking together a bit..."

"Fufu, that's because your hair texture stiffened from swimming in the sea. Of course you may borrow mine."

"Thank you, Nee-sama!"

The conversation between cousins left Asya stunned.

It was as though she had suffered cultural shock within these few minutes. Could this be legendary girl talk revolving around topics such as "skin-whitening, sunburn prevention, UV protection and products for avoiding hair damage"?

This was territory that Asya had never ventured into despite her almost fifteen-year-long life.

Today too, while playing in the water, she had not used the slightest bit of sunscreen.

"Say, Asya, although I described you as very 'rough' earlier..."

By the time she noticed, Luna Francois was already by her side.

"But to be honest, I'm a bit envious. Despite what is clearly dysfunctional maintenance in a certain ways, Asya, your beauty level is quite close to mine."

"R-Really...?"

"Perhaps you are actually the strongest in potential, Asya. Well, but even if you make mend your ways after the fact, we still have an

overwhelming lead."

"....."

After speaking to Asya with what seemed like a bit of frustration, Luna Francois left her.

Asya could sense Luna's refusal to admit defeat, but the blow she suffered was quite devastating. There was no feeling of victory at all. Meanwhile, the Trans-Pacific Shootdown Ace walked over to Orihime's side.

"By the way, Orihime-san, may I issue a declaration of war?"

"Huh, by declaration of war, you mean—What is going on?"

Confronted with the confused black-haired witch, the west coast American girl smiled gracefully.

"I have decided to shoot for Harry's heart, to make him the captive belonging to me, Luna Francois Gregory. So let us compete openly, fair and square. That is what I am proposing."

"Ehhh!?"

"L-Luna-san will shoot for Senpai's heart!?"

"W-W-W-What the heck are you trying to do? Luna!"

Orihime and Hazumi were stunned by the sudden declaration whereas Asya immediately roared.

However, the one who had made the controversial comment remained carefree.

"I mean exactly what I said. I intend to build a wonderful relationship with Harry, which is why I wanted to settle things with you first, Orihime-san, the greatest rival at hand."

"! I do not have that kind of relationship with Haruga-kun—!"

Perhaps startled, Orihime instantly denied loudly.

However, stopped before she finished her sentence. Her lips parted and closed, looking like she had something to say. This persisted for a while.

Rather than having trouble deciding what to say, she was hesitating whether to say it or not.

Witnessing this reaction that did not match Orihime's always cheerful personality, Luna Francois smiled malevolently.

"Not that kind of relationship? Fufufu, my apologies. It looks like it was a misconception on my part since the mood seemed quite nice between you and Harry."

"....."

"In that case, I shall happily proceed as I please without needing to worry about anyone else's feelings♪"

"L-Luna-san, do you really, umm, like Haruga-kun in that way!?"

"Yes. Besides, I believe that there is no one else in this world more suitable than I am for supporting him in all sorts of challenging situations."

"I-In terms of that—Perhaps you are right, but..."

Orihime was shaken for some unknown reason. Usually cheerful and lively, she was stammering right now. Asya found this very baffling. However, Asya felt that she needed to prioritize Luna Francois as a target for her retorts.

"Hold it right there! What kind of nefarious scheme are you plotting again, Luna!?"

"Oh please, you are making me out to be some sort of evil witch... Now that would be considered slander, you know?"

"Please give up on baseless retorts. You are clearly an evil witch, the genuine article."

Ignoring the enemy's counterattack, Asya continued.

"It's useless for you to keep playing dumb. Given that it's you, I'm certain you're trying to seduce Haruomi again to get your hands on the dragonslaying rune, aren't you!?"

"Dear me, what an unpleasant way of putting it."

Stunned on the side, Hazumi silently listened to the interactions between the master-class witches.

Meanwhile, Orihime suddenly showed a relieved look after hearing Asya's forceful accusation, but Asya decided to overlook it for now.

Suddenly, Asya closed her mouth. Luna Francois did the same.

After making eye contact and using their gazes to exchange messages including "Did you sense that?" and "Yes, of course"—

From the sea's direction—An unidentified entity crawled out of the sea!

Indeed, this was an open-air bath situated by the sea. Sensing the approach of strong magical power, Asya and Luna Francois simultaneously put their guards up.

"Kyahhhhhhhh!"

Hazumi screamed in surprise, probably due to the ominous aura exuding from the crawling unidentified *entity*.

Everyone was naked. Let alone a small caliber handgun for self-defense, they did not even have a dagger. Asya could not help but click her tongue while raising her entire body's magical power.

If necessary, she would summon her gigantic partner, Rushalka. She mustered her resolve.

"Kyahhhhhhhh!"

The instant he heard Hazumi's scream, Hal rushed over.

He put down his laptop and sprinted at full speed from the inn lobby to the public bath. The frail underclassman's scream definitely came from this direction.

In contrast, Hinokagutsuchi could not even be bothered to get up.

"I never expected a situation to arise for real. A fool's will can penetrate stone huh..."

She simply sighed rather poignantly.

Hal had no time to bother with her. Without looking back, he ran as fast as he could.

This moment, at the scene of the incident—Right inside that

forbidden garden. At an occasion like this, there was no time to waste on anything else!

Hal ran like mad along the corridor and pushed through the curtain labeled "female bath."

First, he stormed into the changing area—No one there. After sliding open the glass door that ought to be called the door to Shangri-La, he stepped into the public bath—However, there was not a single soul.

Neither infant girls, young girls, maidens, women, nor old ladies were present. But voices were coming from outdoors.

"W-What on earth, is this!? Kyahhh!"

"Calm down, Hazumi! I'll save you right away—Nnnnn!"

"Asya! Use my Glinda and your Rushalka to drag it down!"

"Got... it. O-O ancient divine seal of purity!"

Familiar girls were yelling outside—The open-air bath!?

Hal left the indoor bath and went to the open-air bath outside. Since it was still three in the afternoon, the sky was still bright and sunny. Even the sound of ocean waves could be heard clearly.

Offering a view of Sagaminada in the distance, this open-air bath was also a hot spring providing beautiful scenery for bathers.

But in the next instant, Hal was greeted by unexpected scenery.

Inside the open-air bath's premises, several white serpents were squirming around—No, wait.

They were not serpents. Indeed, they were extremely similar to snakes and worms in form, crawling all over the floor with slithering trails. However, they were not snakes.

Rather, these were tentacles.

Dozens of tentacles were currently slithering inside the open-air bath.

They were very white in color though translucent. Hazumi, Orihime, Asya and Luna Francois, the four of them had been

captured, pulled into that creepy unidentified entity.

Naturally, all the girls were completely naked.

The curves of Hazumi's current figure were already quite attractive. Hal really looked forward to her growth after a few years.

Due to the sun's radiant blessings, Orihime's body was colored with a healthy olive tone. Somewhat different from the last time when he had caught a direct glimpse, her body was radiant with outgoing vitality.

As for Asya—Just skip her.

This would probably be the same awkwardness as when someone accidentally encountered their mother or sister in the nude.

Then there was Luna Francois.

The exploding impression from her bulging chest, a narrow waist that was like a work of art, and the curves traced out from below the waist were seizing Hal's heart with tyranny. Due to Luna's aggressive advances over the past few days, Hal had accumulated a fair amount of frustration inside, thus delivering an excessively shocking impact to him this moment.

However, the four witches were all tied up.

Every girl had six or seven tentacles wrapped around her. The translucent white tentacles were coiled around their necks, shoulders, elbows, arms, chests, under the breasts, waists, thighs, knees, down to the ankles.

Entangled by these tentacles, the various *risque parts* such as the pink tips of the breasts were starting to flash in and out of view tantalizingly. Amid this crisis, the four girls persisted in struggling their very hardest.

Despite her distraught expression, Hazumi desperately wrested the tentacle off her neck.

Orihime reached out to save her cousin, trying to approach her, but kept getting pulled back by tentacles, preventing her from taking a single step.

Asya and Luna Francois were also immobilized by multiple

tentacles.

Even so, the two master-class witches were trying to chant songs of summoning. Two pentagrams, magic circles for materializing 'serpents,' had appeared in the air above the open-air bath.

Under normal circumstances, these pentagrams would immediately turn into leviathans.

But this time was different. The two pentagrams were blinking like a broken light bulb—The tentacles entangling their bodies were suppressing the witches' power!

Hal immediately summoned his magic gun with his right hand.

Using triple burst mode to fire, he pulled the trigger four times.

Bang bang bang bang bang bang bang bang bang bang bang!

Accompanied by deafening gunshots, twelve bullets of red light flew haphazardly in the air. Infused with auto-tracking magic, the bullets of light released by the magic gun penetrated the dozens of tentacles running amok in the open-air bath.

Not only that, the bullets of light did not stop after the first impact.

Each time a bullet pierced a tentacle, it would then make a rapid U-turn to attack the next tentacle. This scene kept repeating in the next ten-odd seconds. The tentacles in the open-air bath were rendered fodder by the magic gun, smashed to pieces and falling to the ground as countless scraps of flesh.

Moreover, despite being exposed to the rain of bullets, the four witches remained completely unharmed.

Filtering out the tentacles precisely, the bullets of red light destroyed them successively. This amazing feat was exclusive to a magical gun and impossible for ordinary firearms.

Hal exhaled with a "phew" and immediately used Enemy Detection magic.

—No response. The tentacles were all wiped out, apparently.

"Senpai! Thank you!"

"You saved us, Haruga-kun!"

Perhaps out of relief, Hazumi and Orihime suddenly ran over to him.

Thank goodness everyone was alright, Hal could not help but narrow his eyes. Next, he focused his eyes intently as though trying to brand upon his retinas the witches' figures that he might not find another chance to witness within this lifetime—

Hal saw it.

Asya raised her arm in a pose reminiscent of someone about to throw an object.

"You're leering so much that you're stretching your face until it's about to tear! Damn Haruomiiiiiii!"

As expected of the childhood friend. Hal was originally trying to put on as dignified an expression as possible, but Asya instantly read his ulterior motives.

What she launched with an overarm throw was the black stone.

That *signpost to the Dragon Palace* which she kept with her for experimenting.

Flying at high speed, the stone struck Hal's forehead. Logically speaking, since Haruga Haruomi's body had been enhanced by the Rune of the Bow, even without deploying the imperishable protection which was like a shield, it should be fine because a mere stone would not be able to inflict even a scratch on him.

Unexpectedly, the attack made him lose balance. Adding the fact that the floor of the open-air bath was quite wet and slippery—

Hal slipped and fell backwards.

"Senpai!?" "Haruga-kun!?"

He could hear Hazumi and Orihime's worried voices.

However, what entered his view was not the two girls but the blue sky—No.

At this moment, Hal should be lying face up on the open-air bath's slippery floor, but suddenly, the back of his head was lifted up then cushioned by something soft.

In the next instant, a pair of pale peaks suddenly entered his view that was supposed to be of the blue sky.

F-cups by visual estimate based on their shape, size and elasticity, two breasts tipped with lovely pink. Not only was Hal given a bottom-up perspective, he was also treated to a direct view of this beautiful scenery up close.

"A-Are you alright!? Your head collided with the floor loudly, you know!?"

"Don't worry, this is nothing at all..."

After responding to Orihime's calls, Hal figured it out.

In other words—Orihime had run over to rest his head on her lap. Speaking of which, the sensation supporting the back of his head not only felt soft but also elastic.

Friendly, eager to help others, yet also quite careless, this was Juujouji Orihime.

Forgetting to cover her chest when running over here to care for Hal and even resting his head on her lap.

"H-Hang in there, Senpai!"

After her, Hazumi leaned in too.

Pure as an angel, the junior student was kneeling on the floor, gazing at Hal's face with worry. That being said, she had not neglected to cover her naked chest with her right arm.

Even so—

The valley of a fourteen-year-old's cleavage was still drawing attention vividly before his eyes.

Crap. Staring at curvature that was plenty for her age, Hal warned himself.

All things considered, it would be quite inappropriate for a gentleman to continue admiring the girls' unseemly state of undress in this manner.

Hal shut his eyes tight.

He intended to cut off the stream of visual data by pretending to faint.

"Haruga-kun, pull yourself together!" "Senpai!"

The bowl-like F-cups and the valley disappeared from sight too.

After that, while struggling in a world of darkness against the thought of "I still wanna open my eyes with a slight gap," Hal thought back.

Right before falling down just now, the last thing he saw was—

Luna Francois had hastily picked up a towel to cover up her outstanding figure and glared viciously at Hal. Presumably, exposing her naked body to him was quite a blow to her.

Luna, always so elegant and crafty.

But at that moment, her entire body had been shaking in anger.



Chapter 4 - Monsters and the Night at the Remote Island

Part 1

Naturally, the brief battle at the open-air bath plunged the inn into chaos.

No wonder. After all, not only were screams and gunshots heard, there were also the shredded remains of eerie white tentacles and countless scattered scraps of flesh all around the open-air bath.

Leaving the confounded inn staff, Hal and company made contact with SAURU's Tokai branch and important members at Tokyo New Town. Using their connections to the police and authorities in the Izu and Shimoda area, they swiftly cleaned up the mess in secret.

Finally, after getting embroiled in unnecessary trouble, the group welcomed dawn the next day.

Hal and company went out to sea from the Sagaminada coast.

Naturally, this was part of their search for the Dragon Palace. What they borrowed was a multi-purpose support vessel from the JMSDF base at Irouzaki, the SDF facility closest to their accommodations. It was a small ship roughly seventy meters in length, normally used for transportation, supplies and rescue operations.

This time, it had set sail to aid witches and "serpents."

That being said, there was no specific destination for this voyage. Inside the ship, enough to carry forty passengers, a cabin had been set up as a "witches' prep room." Hal and company were holding a meeting in there currently.

"The shrine worshipping Goddess Hinokagutsuchi apparently holds a ceremony to pay respects to the Dragon Palace once every few years," said Hal while looking at his usual laptop.

Asya, Orihime, Hazumi and Luna Francois&mash;The witches were all gathered in one room too.

"It's said that an exceptionally good-looking shrine maiden had to set sail with the signpost in her hand. 'If a shrine maiden sets sail together with this stone, a messenger will greet her as a guide to reach the Dragon Palace...' Hinokagutsuchi seems to be the type to issue divine decrees, I guess."

The laptop was displaying the shrine information he described. In addition, Hal had talked at length with the local priest to obtain all kinds of information.

"According to records, they apparently held thiis ceremony during the century from 1602 in the late Sengoku era until the Kyouhou Reforms."

After listening to Hal's report, the reserved but inquisitive Hazumi asked incredulously, "May I ask why the ceremony was later discontinued?"

"Probably because of decreasing magical power in successive generations of shrine maidens in charge of carrying out the ceremony, thus preventing them from using the signpost successfully. In fact, shortly after the stone came into Asya's possession, those slimy tentacles that showed up probably came to greet us."

"But weren't we on land the whole time yesterday? We didn't set sail at all."

Equally incredulous, Orihime spoke up too.

"Why did it come all the way ashore?"

"I'm thinking it might be because Asya's magical power is too strong. Those capable enough to be certified as master-class are extremely rare in both ancient and medieval times."

"About that signpost stone..."

Pensively, Asya murmured.

"I tried many times to pour magical power into it. Perhaps that's why it activated a little. Look, like this."

Asya pointed to the black stone on the table in the cabin.

The stone's surface was black with a slight tinge of green. After merely seconds, this blackness began to glow with faint golden light. After settling down for two minutes, the stone turned golden again for roughly two seconds. Two minutes later, it glowed for two seconds again.

This golden blinking persisted after this in repetition.

Seeing that, Luna Francois commented with interest, "It's almost like a slowly beating heart."

Yesterday at the open-air bath, Hal and the others had definitely witnessed it. The always elegant American girl had trembled in rage for the first time—But after that, Luna Francois quickly resumed her facade of "the elegant, intelligent and scheming beauty."

Ultimately, Luna was seen in anger for only an instant.

Glancing at the blonde beauty's indifferent face, Hal said, "To verify the hypothesis step by step, our only choice is to set sail on a ship to imitate the legend. Let's see if we come across anything by circling randomly in nearby waters."

"However, Harry—"

Luna Francois picked up the signpost stone.

"Perhaps contrary to expectations, we might make contact straight away? Based on the timing yesterday, we should be 'greeted' very soon."

The current time was slightly before noon. More than two hours had elapsed since setting out to sea.

It was a perfect sunny day yesterday while today's cloud cover was rather thick.

On this overcast day, Luna would be proven correct seven minutes later.

A large creature was rapidly approaching the ship.

Prior to the ship announcement, Luna Francois had already made a further prediction.

"Glinda's bloodlust has risen slightly... It seems that some kind of hostile entity with a certain level of combat ability is currently closing in on us."

Glinda, the "Good Witch of the South," was Luna's partner.

As a safety precaution, she had materialized on the deck as the "sailor on lookout duty."

"Luna, I'll be in charge of attacking, so I'm leaving defense to you. Orihime-san and Hazumi-san, please standby, ready to take action as necessary!"

Asya swiftly moved to the deck and issued orders.

Less experienced in battle, Orihime and Hazumi nodded obediently. Her equal, Luna Francois, did not raise any objections either. Although the two of them were master-class witches and had fought side by side many times before as well, perhaps they had reached a consensus beforehand that Asya would take command on the front lines.

Then on the deck—

Under the gray sky covered with dark clouds, the four witches and Hal arrived in haste.

The wind was very strong today. The support vessel sailed forward, slicing through tall waves. The enemy caught on marine radar and detected by Glinda had yet to come into sight.

In a certain corner on the deck was a three-meter-long magic beast.

A maned lion with orange fur, except with a dragon head connected to the right shoulder and a black goat head on the left—This was Glinda.

Normally speaking, leviathans should be around ten-odd meters in body length.

However, materializing a leviathan at her original size would cause continuous strain on the witch. When a witch reached her limit, she would experience symptoms akin to anemia. Hence, Luna had shrunk Glinda to the smallest size in order to minimize the burden of sustaining the manifestation.

In addition to powerful moves as befitted a Shootdown Ace, she was also adept in performing intricate techniques of this sort.

After showing off skills as befitted a master-class witch, Luna Francois commanded quietly, "Glinda, we shall protect this ship together. Gravity Wall!"

Ruoooooooooooo!

Responding to her partner's instructions, Glinda's three heads roared simultaneously.

Immediately, the pseudo-divinity of Gravity was invoked. The transparent force field surrounding the seventy-meter-long support vessel was a supergravitational barrier capable of deflecting all objects daring to trespass its interior.

A minute or two later...

Close to a hundred writhing tentacles shot out from the sea.

The tentacles were white and slightly translucent like the ones at the open-air bath.

However, they were blocked by Glinda's gravity barrier this time, unable to invade anywhere within ten meters of the support vessel. Seizing this opportunity, Asya chanted loudly, "I pray to the ancient divine seal of purity! Send the transient blue dragon to the ground! Let the star of purification manifest over our heads!"

Directly above the support vessel, a pentagram of light manifested in the sky over the sea.

The pentagram immediately changed to a "∞" sign before turning into a blue wyvern.

"Rushalka, melee combat."

Standing with arms crossed on the deck, Asya calmly issued orders.

In the sky, Rushalka immediately spread her wings and dashed towards the sea surface. Like a seabird hunting a school of fish, she dipped her resilient hind legs into the water then ascended rapidly.

Rushalka kept rising.

Caught in the sharp triple claws of her extended hind legs was a squid roughly seven meters long.

However, unlike normal squid, it had almost a hundred tentacles instead of ten. Blocked by the gravity barrier and unable to approach the support vessel, the vast number of tentacles all belonged to this massive squid.

Nauseatingly long with frighteningly numerous tentacles—What a bizarre monster.

"A relative of the giant squid huh..."

While Hal watched, Rushalka continued to ascend.

Carrying a large squid with an astounding number of tentacles, she flew high in the sky.

"Rushalka, Laser Breath!"

Hearing Asya's command, the blue wyvern released the massive squid's body.

Dropped from the sky, the squid spread itself out in free fall towards the sea. As a marine creature after all, it was not equipped with flight capability.

After locking on the target, Rushalka fired a blue-white heat beam from her mouth.

Direct hit. The massive squid's head and mantle were instantly blown apart, leaving the hundred or so tentacles to fall into the sea with successive splashes.

However, at the moment of victory, Luna Francois whispered, "Looks like the visitors don't intend to leave yet. Glinda, show everyone your true power!"

Glinda had been shrunk to her minimum size at a body length of roughly three meters.

The orange three-headed lion suddenly expanded, turning back into her original form within the blink of an eye—A magic beast ten-odd meters long.

Glinda released her entire body's magical power to strengthen the gravity barrier.

In the next second, a new monster appeared from the sea. Unbelievably, it was even bigger than the previous one.

"Th-That thing would be an octopus... Right? Nee-sama!?"

"If anything, it seems more like a hybrid offspring between an octopus and a dragon..."

One could hardly blame Hazumi and Orihime for whispering to each other while on standby.

The head of the monster surfacing from the sea was very similar to that of an octopus.

But apart from that, it closely resembled an elite dragon in both body shape and size.

Ten-odd meters in length, its entire body was covered with dark green scales with a pair of bat-like wings on its back. The two forelimbs serving as arms looked resilient yet agile. Dozens of tentacles sprouted around the beak of its octopus-like head.

Each of those tentacles was wriggling like a snake.

Cthhhhhhhhhlllsh!

The octopus-headed dragon subspecies roared. Immediately, the dozens of tentacles around its beak extended simultaneously towards the support vessel protected by the gravity barrier, moving as carnivorous snakes would to strike prey.

The barrier deployed by Glinda kept the attacking tentacles at bay for now.

"This strength and magical power feels as though it could rival an elite..."

Luna Francois frowned.

However, almost simultaneously with her murmur, someone counterattacked decisively—Asya.

The other Shootdown Ace called out sonorously while moving to the deck's far point—The prow. Presumably, she wanted to send commands and magical power to her partner from as near a distance as possible.

"Rushalka, use pseudo-divinity to restrain the enemy. Ice Prison!"

This was a command to turn her blue partner into a pseudo-god of water.

In response, Rushalka spread her wide wings and started to glide. Countless small white orbs of light were released successively from around her wings.

The numerous light orbs resembled scales more than snow, drifting down to the sea surface.

The octopus-headed dragon subspecies was bathed in them—

The monster was half-submerged with the lower half of its body in the sea.

As a result, the sea targeted by Rushalka instantly froze into ice. Transformed into something akin to an antarctic ice shelf, the sea trapped the dragon subspecies, immobilizing it.

Cthhhhhhhllllsh!

Immediately, six runes of Ruruk Soun appeared above the octopus head. Hal was shocked as soon as he read its meaning. This arrangement signified "dispel magic"!

The newly frozen sea surface turned back to ordinary seawater within the blink of an eye.

"I can't believe that octopus head can even use runes of Ruruk Soun...!"

Hal could not help but click his tongue. However, that was not all.

The sea surface was suddenly split open to reveal another octopus-headed dragon subspecies.

The second one spread the wings on its back and flew into the air. At the same time, it extended the dozens of tentacles around its beak to attack Rushalka in the sky above!

The blue wyvern flew diagonally upwards nimbly, dodging spectacularly.

Finally recovered just last month, Europe's strongest "serpent" was in command of excellent reaction speed. Meanwhile, on the deck of the support vessel carrying Hal and company, the Trans-Pacific region's strongest "serpent" was growling.

Glinda's three heads—The lion, the black goat and the dragon.

While roaring simultaneously in warning, the three heads glared at the other octopus-headed dragon next to the ship.

"Even though the enemy can use Ruruk Soun magic, Glinda and I will guard here... Harry and Orihime-san, you two attack and take down the enemy as quickly as possible!"

"Understood!"

Hearing Luna Francois' quick shout, Orihime responded firmly.

Compared to the gentle Hazumi and Minadzuki, Orihime and Akuro-Ou were more suited to attacking. While nodding at the correct choice of candidate, Hal also shouted to the underclassman who was showing a stiff expression.

"Standby farther back. Best to pick somewhere that allows you to get back inside the ship any time!"

"Y-Yes. I understand!"

The honest Hazumi immediately moved. Presumably, she was either aware that she was not good at combat or had noticed that her presence on the front line would only be a hindrance.

However, something unexpected happened no sooner had Hazumi taken a couple steps.

All fired up to fight, Glinda suddenly stopped howling.

"What's the matter, Glinda?"

"Eh, no way!? Haruga-kun, look at that..."

"Don't tell me—it's a dragonslaying rune!?"

Hal and company saw it. A pictograph similar to the "𪛗" kanji had appeared on the forehead of the octopus head—the dragon subspecies near the support vessel.

It was most likely the fourth dragonslaying rune to appear after the Bow, the Sword and the Arrow—

Hal understood this instinctively while standing next to Orihime and Luna Francois.

Immediately, the octopus-headed dragon subspecies extended dozens of tentacles again to assault the deck. Unlike the previous time, a "𪛗"-like rune appeared successively on the tip of each tentacle!

Imbued with the power of dragonbane, the tentacles broke through the gravity barrier this time, rushing at the group.

Hal immediately deployed imperishable protection. The pearly radiance proceeded to spread in his surroundings to protect Luna and Orihime in addition to its user.

While enduring the tentacles' mighty force, Hal was attacked by a sharp pain in his heart.

Fortunately, no one was hurt at all. But unexpectedly, in the next instant, five tentacles wrapped around the sphere of imperishable protection, picking up Hal and the two witches together with the pearly radiance, pulling them away from the deck with astounding strength!

...Towards the sea where this bizarre monster was located, towards the octopus head's giant beak.

Part 2

"Like us, the enemy wields the power of dragonbane—"

"Meaning that my Glinda is unable to fight it head on..."

"!? That monster's face is getting close!"

Hal, Luna Francois and Orihime were guarded by imperishable protection, but tentacles imbued with a dragonslaying rune were wrapped around the pearly shield, gradually pulling the trio towards the octopus head's beak.

Confronted with her own helplessness and expressing her anguish through her voice was Luna.

The blonde Shootdown Ace snapped her fingers with a look of frustration. Glinda instantly vanished, apparently de-materializing after receiving her partner's command.

This was a wise decision. It was not yet time to give up.

With the battle situation up in the air and an opponent wielding the power of dragonbane, it was possible to receive a fatal injury any moment. Such an outcome must be avoided no matter what.

"Akuro-Ou, come fight by my side!"

On the side, Orihime shouted words of summoning without a moment's delay.

Looking above the enemy, she kept staring at the air over the strange octopus head. Soon after, a glowing pentagram appeared at that space then turned into an infinity symbol, finally transforming into a nine-tailed fox-wolf.

The leviathan, Akuro-Ou, materialized.

Motionless in the air, Akuro-Ou exhaled a breath of flame at the enemy from diagonally above.

Cthhhhhhhlllsh!

The octopus head roared in pain. The tentacles dragging Hal's trio

also stopped.

"Haruga-kun, I am ready any time!"

"Okay. Looks like *that side* is almost ready too. We should hurry and make our getaway."

Responding to Orihime, Hal looked over to "that side."

Rushalka was currently flying at high speed. Riding the wind as light and agile as a swallow, she sliced through the air.

The second dragon subspecies was pursuing her. Writhing restlessly, the tentacles extending from around the octopus beak chased the blue wyvern. Although Rushalka's speed was superior, the enemy was able to use dangerous runes of Ruruk Soun. The situation looked bleak.

Hal summoned the emblem appearing in his right palm.

It was a pictograph shaped like a fully drawn bow—The Rune of the Bow.

"Grant the rune's power to Juujouji and Asya—!"

The Rune of the Bow instantly appeared on the back of Orihime's right hand. Not far away, surely the same thing happened to Asya's right hand.

"Akuro-Ou! Use fire magic to finish it in one go!"

Orihime issued an attack command again. This time, the Rune of the Bow appeared on the tips of Akuro-Ou's nine tails then shot nine projectiles of flame.

Struck by the scorching assault, the first dragon subspecies' entire body turned into a fireball.

The octopus head, the dozens of tentacles and the body similar to an elite dragon, all was devoured by tongues of flame.

On the other side was Rushalka with a long horn on her forehead like a unicorn.

Until just earlier, the situation had consisted of an aerial battle with the wyvern relentlessly pursued by the second octopus head, but now, the Rune of the Bow appeared on both of Rushalka's wings at

the same time.

In the next instant, the blue wyvern performed a swift aerial turn, circling to her enemy's back within an eye's blink.

A blue-white beam was fired from her horn. Undoubtedly, it was a beam capable of slaying dragons. Skewered, the octopus head began to crash.

However, Hal did not lower his guard. He stared intently at the flames released by Akuro-Ou.

The crimson blaze incinerated the sea surface, producing quite a surreal scene. In the depths of this sea of flame, Hal could sense the "𐤁"-like dragonslaying rune shining with brilliant splendor.

Apart from that, the imperishable protection defending Hal and his two companions—the pearly defensive shield—

The five tentacles ensnaring this layer of protection remained intact despite bathing in the intense flames.

In that instant, Hal understood the meaning represented by the rune resembling the "𐤁" character.

"...A chain!?"

No mistake. This was the Rune of the Chain.

At that moment, as though in response to Hal for discerning its true identity, the tentacles entangling the imperishable protection suddenly transformed into steel chains.

Instantly, the clanging noise of chains colliding sounded all around.

Kuoooooooooh!? Perhaps feeling fear, Akuro-Ou howled in surprise. By the time Hal noticed, chains had extended towards the nine-tailed fox-wolf, tying her up.

The surrounding scenery also changed dramatically, from the surrounding waters of Sagaminada to a pitch-black space.

The chains constricting Hal's imperishable protection vanished, leaving darkness to spread continuously in Hal and company's surroundings.

"W-What on earth is going on...!?"

"Enemy magic. Looks like they intend to capture us. Be careful, Harry!"

Within the pitch-black darkness, Orihime was bewildered while Luna issued a warning.

Hal also noticed something new: this was not simple magic but a technique of assured annihilation—A finishing move belonging to a dragonslaying rune.

In that case, they might lose their lives if they were to react a moment too slow.

Hal immediately summoned his magic gun and chose fully automatic fire. At the same time, he simultaneously cast Enemy Detection and Aim magic to locate and snipe the Rune of the Chain's main body in the darkness.

Hence, his right arm moved autonomously then settled in front of Hal.

He pulled the trigger. Since the enemy had used a technique of assured annihilation, he had to respond in kind with fully automatic fire to sweep away all restraining enchantments. The magic gun's thirty bullets turned into crimson flashes of light, released all in one go.

—I feel a hit.

The surrounding darkness swiftly dissipated as the group returned to the same sea as before.

"Wahhhhhh!"

Suddenly falling into the sea, Hal cried out without thinking.

He saw Luna Francois and Orihime also falling into the sea nearby. Hal thrashed his arms and legs desperately to prevent his body from sinking while maintaining a water treading posture.

Due to his clothed state, it was impossible to swim well like yesterday when they were playing in the sea.

"I suppose it's natural for us to fall into the sea once the chains trapping us disappeared..."

"I-I can't see the SDF ship and Rushalka... Where are we!?"

Luna Francois accepted the current situation with resignation. Orihime was showing a stunned expression.

Hal tread water while looking at the dusk sky. Although the enemy had clearly attacked at noon, the sun was already setting now.

"Looks like we're in for some trouble..."

Fortunately, amid all the misfortune, the nine-tailed fox-wolf was casually floating on the water.

Ensnared by chains earlier as well, Akuro-Ou had been forcibly dragged here too.

Not confined to land or sky, leviathans were also capable of moving freely in water. Even a sacred beast, dozens of meters long, could still frolic gracefully in the water like a whale. Hal and the two witches began to swim in order to hold on to Akuro-Ou's white fur.

"Looks like we'll have to spend the night here," muttered Hal while walking on a paved concrete path.

Thanks to the scorching summer heat, his drenched clothing was almost dried out.

The sun was about to sink completely into the ground. The sky was dyed orange by the rays of dusk. At this moment, night was about to fall upon this remote island.

Roughly an hour had passed since Hal fell into the sea with Orihime and Luna Francois.

After that, the trio had mounted the totally drenched fox-wolf's back and discovered an isolated island several hundred meters away.

They had to hurry to find dry land before night.

Flying through the air towards the target, Akuro-Ou landed swiftly.

Judging from what they could observe before landing, this island had a fair amount of area.

Apart from that, they could see a few rooftops. While pondering that the total population could be less than a thousand, Hal asked Orihime to land at the pier, but...

After circling around the pier's immediate area, Hal came up with an idea.

Meanwhile, walking by his side, Orihime smiled cheerfully.

"Fortunately, there was an inhabited island nearby, thank goodness. Although I have no idea where this island is at all, it should be within Japan's borders, right?"

Orihime pointed at the stop sign reading "tomare." It was undoubtedly something from Japan.

Hal looked at the sky. The darkness had intensified. Even though it was still early in the evening, he could recognize the Summer Triangle constellation whose corners were defined by the stars of Vega, Deneb and Altair.

Incidentally, although it had been cloudy at noon, the sky was clear now.

"Judging from the position of the stars, we probably haven't gone too far away from the sea near Izu. Let's pick a random home to enter and gather information."

"Why not ask a resident directly?" Orihime asked with a wry smile after listening to Hal's analysis.

"Well, we'll probably get treated as weirdos if we ask these types of questions. But I guess it's still necessary to ask around. Moreover, we must take care of lodgings for tonight... Oh, but I didn't bring my purse," said Orihime, suddenly making a pensive look as though something had occurred to her.

"It would be a bit shameless, but do we have to resort to the 'please let us stay over for one night' approach...?"

"If it's only accommodations, I do have enough money for that."

"You are amazing, Haruga-kun!"

"Rather than a work habit, it's more like a occupational disease. It comes in handy once in a while."

Haruga Haruomi was both a student and a treasure hunter.

Hence, as a precaution against emergencies, he had already developed a habit of carrying bank notes of large denominations in

various currencies including US dollars and credit cards in a waterproof container, hidden in either a shoe or a secret pocket in his pants. Doing this allowed him to enter all kinds of venues without money troubles as long as he was not trapped in some kind of uninhabited wilderness.

"But it still hurts that I didn't bring wireless radio or a satellite phone. Based on the current situation, they might be more useful after all..."

Listening to Hal's muttering, Orihime made a questioning look.

In any case, he did not expect the beautiful and resilient Japanese beauty to have any major problems in either mental or physical stamina. Even confronted with this type of situation, she remained lively as ever. Although some level of unease was unavoidable, given who she was, she would probably overcome it straight away.

On the other hand, whom he needed to worry about was the blonde Shootdown Ace instead.

"Although I am not Asya, I still would like to have dinner first, if possible..."

Luna Francois grumbled in exhaustion.

Hal did not know if she was tired or conserving energy, but she had given up walking on her own. Instead, she had materialized Glinda in her smallest size, riding on her back for transportation.

No matter what, the trio had just experienced various ordeals including fighting, swimming and drifting in the sea.

Perhaps Luna Francois was the normal one for feeling utterly exhausted.

"I must take a bath or a shower later. Ideally, a hot spring would be best... Followed by an air-conditioned room. Japanese summers are hot and stuffy, simply staying outside for too long makes me fatigued..."

"After all, we had so much sweat today and even fell into the sea."

Orihime smiled and concurred with the Luna Francois' complaining.

"Let's hang in there a little longer, Luna-san. Even if there isn't any

air-conditioning, I think they'll surely have electric fans."

"I suppose you're right... I must pull myself together even if we've arrived on an isolated island filled with obstinate, malicious and anti-social senior citizens. Look forward to it, Orihime-san. I shall make full use of my abilities to deceive encountered islanders and secure a cool and comfortable night for us!"

"That's the spirit. Although I can't agree with everything you just said, that's more like the Luna-san I know!"

However, five minutes later, their hopes were dashed completely.

Finally coming across a village where ten-odd homes were gathered, they could not see the slightest bit of lighting. The houses were separated by at least ten minutes of walking distance from one another. It seemed like a farming or fishing village no matter how you looked. More importantly, it did not feel like anyone was living here at all. They were all derelict and empty houses.

Hal nodded.

The fact that they could let Glinda walk openly on the road indicated several symptoms:

First of all, they had not encountered a single islander on their way to this village. Secondly, it was already dark but no streetlights were lit. Thirdly, the few fishing boats moored at the pier were all in damaged and abandoned states. Fourthly, there was a subtle atmosphere of desolation on the island, etc—

Overhead, the night sky was so beautiful.

The black night finally shrouded the desert island completely.

Hal took out a penlight and made an inauspicious prediction.

"Judging from appearances, island might've been uninhabited for many years already. Or due to population loss caused by dragon attacks nearby, it finally turned into an uninhabited island... That's what it looks like."

Lifelines such as water, electricity and gas had presumably stopped operating.

Quite suddenly, the trio began a desert island adventure.

Part 3

"Anyway, this should be enough for basic equipment."

Inside the first village they found, Hal went searching for an hour or so on his own.

He handed to his two companions items he had gathered that seem like they could come in useful.

Packs of dry cell batteries, two flashlights, bug spray, machetes, straw hats, old clothing such as t-shirts, towels, rags, Chinese cooking pots, a gas stove, gas canisters, soft drink-flavored bubble gum, biscuits sealed in a can, etc...

He displayed the various spoils of his hunt, laid out on someone's doorstep, illuminated by a flashlight.

Watching this series of actions, Orihime remarked, quite impressed.

"You seem very experienced as always, Haruga-kun."

"How sharp of you, Juujouji. Actually, I've honed this type of skill in wastelands, raiding residences in classic RPG style."

"You're referring to opening people's cupboards and taking items without permission, aren't you...?"

"I also got my hands on some intelligence too. Based on position, this island should lie within the Izu Islands area, which would put in the outskirts, relatively far from Japan proper."

He had reached this conclusion by looking at maps and notepaper with addresses inside houses.

If they were to ride a leviathan and fly into the sky, they could very likely find an inhabited island nearby. But since it was already dark, flying in the sky over the sea during night would be quite dangerous.

Orihime said quietly, "Then for tonight, let's stay on this island until dawn—"

"It'd definitely be safer. There are plenty of houses suitable for

staying overnight."

Hence, the three of them arrived in front of a certain house.

While Hal had gone to ransack homes on his own, the girls had entered this house illegally and cleaned up the interior.

"It was that rune just now that dragged us here—Is that correct?"

"I think so... Why couldn't it have dragged us all the way to the Ogasawara Islands in the south? That way, we might've been able to contact the SDF base at Iwo Jima or the TPDO garrison for help."

"Oh by the way, Luna-san, why don't you try some of this food?"

Pointing at the gathered provisions, Orihime asked the other girl present.

Looking very demoralized, Luna Francois had her shoulders in a slump.

"Though they might not be filling enough, the biscuits have not passed their expiry date. As for chewing gum, there shouldn't be a shelf life limit."

"Gum is a good idea. Humans can erase the feeling of an empty stomach just by chewing stuff."

"Speaking of which, gum could replenish sugar too... Hmm, the biscuits are fine. They haven't gone soft from humidity while the flavor is ordinary but still good. Come, Luna-san, have some too?"

After eating a biscuit as a test first, she offered a second piece to Luna.

It was quite fitting of Orihime's style to keep her spirits up even in the face of adversity such as this. Despite having no survival experience on a desert island, her resilience was enough to put Hal and Asya to shame.

Accepting the biscuit, Luna Francois murmured softly, "Harry aside, Orihime-san is quite adaptable too. Almost like Asya..."

"Oh dear, you are flattering me too much."

"But if you really had to compare, they might actually be equals."

"Haruga-kun, please do not make comments that leave others at a loss on how to respond!"

While encouraging Luna and arguing with Hal, Orihime spontaneously became the lubricant for the trio to get along. As someone good at looking after others, perhaps one third of it was intentional on her part. As for the remaining two thirds, one would attribute it to her inborn nature of kindness.

On the other hand, there was the blonde girl who was neither naive nor would look after others—

"As a child of civilization, this is quite an ordeal. Despite what appearances may imply, I totally cannot tolerate life without these three things: baths, air-conditioning and automobiles."

Putting on a rare expression of displeasure, she told the other two.

Next, she turned to face Hal and grumbled with dissatisfaction, "Somehow you seem quite happy to me, Harry?"

"Not at all. But looking at you right now, you probably don't have any spare energy to set up some kind of honey trap. At least I can relax a bit for now."

"How dare you say that when you were enjoying yourself so much previously..."

"....."

This silence undoubtedly signified tacit admission.

However, the third person present, excluded from the topic, jumped in surprise upon hearing this sudden conversation.

"Eh!? Luna-san did something of that sort to Haruga-kun?"

"After all, I believe it is necessary to conquer Harry sooner and make him my captive," the blonde strategist sighed and explained to the dumbfounded Orihime.

"Don't tell me you have fallen for Haruga-kun!?"

"Of course not. It is for a more practical reason. From the standpoint of combat strength, it would be advantageous if I became able to use the dragonslaying rune as well. This has been proven in the battle just now, right?"

"I-I see. Thank goodness..."

Orihime could not help but widen her eyes. She was probably surprised to learn that her experienced senior, the master-class witch, was pursuing practical interests with such frightening frankness. This sort of reaction was only natural for someone with an inborn conscience like Juujouji Orihime. However, Hal found her occasional furtive glances at him and look of relief a bit inexplicable.

Meanwhile, Luna Francois spoke up in an annoyed tone of voice, "Now that we've reached this juncture, there is no helping it. I need to alter my approach."

"You mean you're terminating the plan for deceiving me into giving you the power of dragonbane?"

"Of course not. Rather, the most pressing matter at hand is how to live comfortably on this uninhabited island. For this purpose, it is even more necessary to deceive you, Harry. By the way, I've been feeling thirsty for a while now. Then if feasible, I would like a bath as soon as possible."

Then Luna Francois finally smiled elegantly.

"If I spoil myself by offering a kiss to Harry's cheek, would it speed up preparations for me?"

"Actually, your desire for comfort without labor strikes a bit of a resonant chord in me, I quite like it. But if possible, could you make someone else a target...?"

"Please regard this as an honor."

While Hal felt his emotions stirring inside, Luna responded with a blooming smile.

"You are the first man for me to acknowledge as valuable enough to exploit. On a global scale, I feel that the probability of a second one showing up would approach zero, so Harry, you might very well be 'number one' and the 'only one.'"

"Even if you speak as though quoting lyrics from Japanese pop music, it's still useless."

"Who cares? If it were some ordinary male in your place, I would've

called Glinda. A single threat would've obtained instant obedience."

It looked Luna Francois had recovered in spirit.

Having never lived as a savage outside of civilization, she was gradually adapting to the situation in her own manner. Despite her ambitious declaration to use Hal, the fact that she said it out openly like a stern and seasoned veteran left Hal no choice but to smile wryly.

Perhaps Orihime was thinking the same things as him. With an expression like a mother looking at a naughty child, she shrugged and said, "In that case, I'd feel bad leaving Haruga-kun to labor alone. Let me report to you that I've discovered something very awesome."

Two hours later—

A well had been discovered outside the village. The water looked very clear and was perfectly drinkable after boiling. Water supply systems on remote islands were imperfect hence they were still using wells in contemporary times. This was quite fortunate for Hal and company.

After drinking water, they rationed out the limited food to satisfy their hungry stomachs—

Splish splash, the sound of water.

Next, Hal heard the two girls release sighs of relaxation from the bottom of their hearts.

"Although today was so tiring, it currently feels like my fatigue is being swept away all at once..."

"This is all thanks to you, Orihime-san... I originally thought that a bath would be an unreasonable demand, yet never did I expect we would be able to have a leisurely hot spring soak like this..."

"Save your thanks for Akuro-Ou. I simply asked for her help..."

"Don't be so modest. The accomplishments of 'serpents' belong to their partners' credit. Hoo—"

"Hoo..."

A natural hot spring had been discovered in the rock formations on the shore. Orihime and Luna Francois had come to this rustic secret bath to enjoy a healing moment for their minds and bodies.

Chatting occasionally, the two of them exhaled in relaxation every now and then.

Prior to this expedition, Orihime had read a travel guide for the Izu area.

Since the Izu Islands were volcanic islands, there were many natural springs. While Haruga Haruomi was searching through houses, Orihime had recalled this fact and sent Akuro-Ou to search for hot springs on this island.

In the end, the clever Akuro-Ou returned successfully with a report of a hot spring's discovery.

At this very moment, Orihime and Luna Francois were stretching their limbs, completely naked in the hot spring, thoroughly relaxing their minds and bodies. It was such bliss that it would not be an exaggeration to call it paradise on earth.

"...Next, let's pray that Haruga-kun won't come here to engage in mischief."

"...I knew it, we should've bound Harry's hands and feet beforehand then added a blindfold so that he couldn't engage in mischief even if he wanted to, right?"

The two girls began to shift their conversation to the boy who was not present.

After listening to Luna Francois' overly radical proposal, Orihime smiled somewhat forcibly.

"I-I think it should be fine? Although he is both closeted and perverted, losing control on occasion, at least he still holds himself to his claim of being a 'gentleman'..."

"Losing control huh...? You are correct. I never expected to be seen in the nude by him in such a manner..."

Perhaps recalling the commotion yesterday, Luna could not help but frown.

Orihime looked a bit flustered for some reason. Suddenly, she raised the pitch of her voice and inquired, "L-Luna-san, you are in the process of seducing Haruga-kun, aren't you!? Don't tell me that circumstances yesterday were part of your plan!?"

"Nothing of that sort. Although it's true that I did consider manipulating him using a similar lure."

"I-I see..."

"Could Harry actually be a fearless fighter with an unexpected abundance of life experiences who dares to brazenly invade bathrooms? Based on my personal observation, his experience with women probably runs contrary to his twistedness in personality, simply at the level of a new recruit. Logically speaking, he shouldn't have any real experience to speak of, but what is the truth?"

"Th-That definitely is the impression that Haruga-kun gives..."

"However, to be that calm in a situation surrounded by naked girls—Orihime-san, could it be that you have secretly allowed Harry to earn experience points behind our backs, somewhere unbeknownst to us?"

Luna Francois questioned in a tone of rationality that did not quite match the topic of conversation.

Recalling various events over the past few months, Orihime was taken aback with shock. Whether Asya or her cousin Hazumi, she had too many secrets that must not be revealed to them. In any case, she had to hurry and respond, "W-What do you mean by that, Luna-san!?"

"For example, didn't you show your naked body generously to Harry?"

"It was not generously! It was an accident. I simply forgot to cover myself for a moment because I was too worried about Haruga-kun!"

"Even if you say that, Orihime-san, I'm afraid that at the current stage, you are the one who treats Harry as a member of the opposite sex the most."

"I beg to differ. Think about it, isn't there Asya-san too...?"

"No way. She is the one person for which it is impossible whether

physically or morally. Asya is a being that has transcended the likes of femininity or gender to reach the realm of Japanese house spirits."

"Oh no... In my view, Asya-san is a very attractive girl..."

"I already found it strange yesterday," said Hal, sitting cross-legged on a rock by the sea.

He was roughly ten meters away from the bathing girls. There was massive rock blocking between him and the hot spring, preventing him from seeing anything. He was talking to Hinokagutsuchi who had materialized again after a day's interval.

The same as last time, he was at a distance where he could hurry to the rescue as soon as any kind of trouble occurred.

The attack yesterday had taken place during bath time too. Hal had the magic gun on his lap while he stayed vigilant of surroundings.

"Despite liking girls so much, you don't enter the female bath very often."

"Pay it no mind. This is simply a principle of mine. Whenever I summon a girl to the bath, I must not stop until I have given every inch of her skin some loving..."

"How can anyone not be curious about the life of a queen that lives with such a principle!"

Shocked by the unexpected answer, Hal changed the subject.

"By the way, I still have many questions about you guys. Whether Genbu-Ou from a while back or the octopus dragon earlier, do the minions of dragon kings include other creatures in addition to dragons?"

"Fufufu. About that huh—"

"Those things earlier are close relatives of dragon subspecies, right? Namely, imitations of dragons. In other words, the same as the leviathans of humans—"

"Yes. They are creatures created by a mystic ritual for synthesizing fake dragons."

After smirking, Hinokagutsuchi said quietly, "Even contemporary humans are able to synthesize immature 'forgeries.' The same goes for your forefathers. It stands to reason that we dragon kings are capable of using the same art."

"I knew it."

"Naturally, our creations are superior and closer to gods. Especially the likes of Genbu-Ou, a 'forgery' bestowed with a goddess' semblance and conferred a power that even ordinary dragons are unable to use freely."

Hal nodded greatly.

Hinokagutsuchi was a valuable source of information but was unsuitable as a teacher.

Hence, Hal aimed for Hinokagutsuchi's rare and talkative moments.

Due to her personality, she found it tedious when asked to instruct others earnestly in detail. Even if he requested that she "tell everything she knew without omission, disclosing with honesty and efficiency," he would not get a serious answer.

His only recourse was to pose questions when she was in a good mood, then organize the obtained information afterwards.

"Why choose subspecies for minions instead of Raptors or elites...?"

"Hmph. Speaking of dragons—especially the pureblooded—more often than not, they are rash and hot-blooded. Except for attacking and fighting, missions are rarely accomplished even when orders are issued."

At this point, Hinokagutsuchi changed the subject.

"Putting that aside, how about the reason you were attacked?"

"Reason?"

"I am referring to the signpost. It has been confirmed during yesterday's incident that it is a piece someone had chipped off the *Dragon Palace Court's* shell to create a whistle. By pouring magical power into it, sound will be transmitted to the Dragon Palace Court."

"What court? Is that the official name of the Dragon Palace where

you used to live?"

"Yes. As long as the sound transmits successfully, the Dragon Palace Court will head over to welcome the user."

"You make it sound like your palace is a mobile castle. But why did tentacled monsters come to welcome us?"

"Indeed. Precisely because of that, it raises a question."

Hinokagutsuchi scoffed furiously, looking quite displeased.

"The queen has not lived in the Dragon Palace Court for almost a millennium. Some lowly peasant from somewhere has taken advantage of the master's absence to take up residence until now... Not entirely implausible."

"Feeling guilty when suddenly hearing the transmitted sound, that guy sent a subordinate, the tentacled squid to scout—"

"Yes, that is very likely too."

The former dragon queen nodded in agreement with Hal's speculation.

But as luck would have it, the Dragon Palace Court's new master turned out to be a successor of dragonslaying power—

"By the way, where did we put that signpost stone later on...?"

Hal and company had obtained the signpost to the Dragon Palace two days earlier.

The situation had been a mess after falling into the sea. He had almost forgotten about t.

Hal traced back his memories. At noon today, the group had held a meeting in the cabin and placed the signpost stone on the table. During that time, Luna definitely picked it up. After that, they had detected the incoming enemy and exited the cabin—That should be what happened.

"Is that stone still in Luna's possession?"

No sooner had Hal spoke than the magic gun on his lap suddenly vibrated.

This was a warning. A wielder of extremely strong magical power was approaching. Hal quickly looked out at sea then gulped.

The pitch-black Pacific Ocean was illuminated by the bright moon and the stars.

A gigantic turtle, as big as a small mountain, had appeared on the sea surface. It was very similar in form as the hundred-meter-long minion, Genbu-Ou, that had served Princess Yukikaze.

However, the total length of the monster this time was at least a kilometer. It was like a small mobile island.

Upon closer examination, the surface of the monster's carapace was extremely level, like flattened land.

On that vast space were symmetrical buildings of varying sizes to form the scenery of a spectacular palace. The architecture was probably based on ancient Chinese styles.

All rooftops were covered with golden glazed tiles.

The pillars and railings were all built using white jade.

And in the center—a entire road was laid in a straight line from the back of the gigantic turtle's head to its tail. Along the road, several large gates and a magnificent main palace had been constructed in an orderly design.

"Hmm, no mistake about it. That there is the Dragon Palace Court... The minion that used to serve as my residence," said Hinokagutsuchi softly.

As predicted, it was minion belonging to the same lineage as Genbu-Ou.

However, the size difference between them was out of this world. Hal was rendered speechless.

Part 4

Hinokagutsuchi suddenly vanished with the Dragon Palace Court's entry to the stage.

In exchange, the magical power in the magic gun surged higher than usual. As soon as she saw the imminent battle, Hinokagutsuchi had suppressed her consciousness to transfer all magical power to the weapon known as the "magic wand."

Hal nodded and ran towards the natural hot spring.

He could not predict what move the unknown usurper or dragon king with indeterminate motive would make. He must reunite with his companions as soon as possible!

Then Hal reached the hot spring's edge—

"Haruga-kun, look at that!"

"Yeah, I know. Any unusual circumstances?"

"None. Say, Harry, aren't you a little disappointed?"

"....."

At the hot spring in the rocks facing the sea, the two girls were already on high alert.

Approaching the shore of the rock formation, out in the distance was the dreadnought-class giant turtle monster. Orihime pointed at the massive body with her finger while Luna Francois showed a tense expression.

The two girls were tightly wrapped in bath towels to cover up their naked bodies.

Incidentally, these bath towels had been found by Hal earlier while searching through the houses.

"I-I am not disappointed. I was just thinking how prepared you two were."

"It hasn't even been a day after all. We have been vigilant the whole

time, taking precautions against weird dragons or Haruga-kun that could appear any moment."

"This is called 'better safe than sorry,' Harry."

After the girls finished speaking calmly, Hal refreshed his mindset.

It was admittedly worth celebrating the fact that they had finished preparing to attack, however, despite having been wrapped around their upper torsos, the bath towels still could not completely hide the cleavage and voluptuous busts that belonged only to these two girls. Their thighs and feet were also exposed to a dazzling degree...!

Naturally, Hal did not let these lustful thoughts show on the outside. He tensed his facial expression and said, "Juujuuji, please summon Akuro-Ou."

"Yes, leave it to me!"

The white nine-tailed fox-wolf instantly appeared in the night sky above the remote island.

However, just as Akuro-Ou showed up, another magic circle also appeared in the air above the Dragon Palace Court.

Platinum-colored light traced out a triangle with dozens of Ruruk Soun runes arranged in a circle to surround the magic circle, rivaling Akuro-Ou in size.

The triangle instantly transformed into an octopus-headed dragon subspecies.

Not only that, a pair of them were attacking right off the bat this time!

"Two against one—Haruga-kun, please pass the power of the rune to me and Akuro-Ou!"

Naturally, he had no reason to refuse a request from Orihime.

As soon as Hal recited an incantation, the Rune of the Bow surfaced on Orihime's right hand. A black arrowhead appeared on the tip of each of Akuro-Ou's nine tails.

Accompanied by the nine arrowheads, Akuro-Ou flew at the two enemies.

"Akuro-Ou, use fire magic and the Bow's power simultaneously to greet them with a finishing move! In a fight, the first strike is the most important!"

Orihime commanded forcefully. With the Rune of the Chain at their disposal, of course the enemies could not be defeated easily. Orihime must have issued her orders after careful contemplation.

Using a powerful attack to restrain the enemy from the get go, meanwhile gauging the enemy's strength—

This was probably her plan. A novice witch whose career had only begun a few short months ago and also a kendo girl who had won a national tournament, she was steadily accumulating concrete combat experience.

Led by Akuro-Ou, the nine arrowheads began to burn intensely.

Thus, the arrowheads turned into burning projectiles to attack the two octopus-headed dragons.

The nine flames struck their targets with surprising accuracy. Four of the arrowheads connected with the first dragon while the other five pierced the second, defeating and incinerating them, resulting in a giant explosion.

The two octopus-headed dragons were crushed in an instant, rendered into flaming charcoal.

" " "!" " " "

Faced with this landslide victory, Hal, Orihime and Luna Francois could not help but stare wide-eyed.

But at that very instant, the sound of clanging chains appeared. Apart from that, they could hear the chain user's mantra—A dragonslaying incantation.

"I hereby pray to my seal that shines in the sea of stars, the Chain of Heavenly Imprisonment. Grant me power to enslave yonder female dragon."

The enemy recited quietly in a gloomy voice.

An iron chain suddenly flew in with a square counterweight on its tip.

With lightning speed, the chain wrapped around Orihime, who was clothed in nothing but a towel, immobilizing her in merely an instant.

"Kyahhhhhhh!?"

Leaving a scream behind, the improperly dressed Orihime vanished just like that.

Orihime had suddenly gone missing. Immediately, her newly victorious partner, Akuro-Ou, also disappeared from the sky.

Seeing Orihime and Akuro-Ou vanish, Hal's mind instantly went blank.

With irrepressible rage, he stared at Orihime's former location, then the iron chain, all the way to the opponent wielding this chain—The enemy had shown up extremely up close by the time he noticed.

The "chain user" was standing on a rock merely a couple meters away.

"—!"

Hal raised his gun to shoot without saying a word, aiming for the user's heart.

However, the bullets were deflected by a pearly barrier. Obviously, that was imperishable protection.

Surrounded by imperishable protection, the chain user was standing on two legs, featured a pair of arms, but was covered with scales. The face and head were like a ferocious reptile's. A pair of dragon wings sprouted from the back.

A Draconian.

This was a half-human half-dragon form that elite dragons took on through magic.

A body colored gray on the surface, dressed in a black robe. The gray Draconian was gripping one end of the long chain in his hand, presumably the manifestation of the Rune of the Chain similar to Hal's magic gun.

The iron chain was roughly ten-odd meters in length.

The chain activated again and clanged, turning into a spiral to

encircle him. It looked almost like a spiraling vortex of stars.

The spiral chain completely blocked the thirty bullets shot with fully automatic fire!

"No effect at all!?"

Informed by the magic gun, Hal was shocked.

The Rune of the Chain was definitely not an easy power of dragonbane to control, if simply used for offense. After all, as the manifestation of a "chain," it could not be used purely as a weapon. Conversely, a chain was suitable for special purposes such as binding, sealing or defense...

"Meaning it's the transforming type?"

While muttering softly, Hal noticed something else.

Could this Draconian chain user be a dragon king instead of a Tyrannos?

In the past, when Hinokagutsuchi saw the radiance given off by Pavel Galad, the user of the Rune of the Sword, she had exposed the fact that he was not a dragon king. This time, Hal had witnessed the Rune of the Chain multiple times. Its platinum-colored splendor was much more powerful than his own or Galad's...

He had zero remaining ammunition whereas the only "serpent," Glinda, could not oppose a dragonslayer.

Furthermore, if the enemy was dragon king-class—Hal exhaled deeply. In that case, he had no choice but to unleash everything he was capable of.

"Harry, if the situation turns desperate, I could send Glinda on a suicide run to secure an escape route."

"Thanks. In the worst-case scenario, we might really have to do that, then I'm counting on you when the time comes. But in a word, let's try out my final trump card first..."

He thanked Luna, whose tone of voice was nervous and stiff rather than calm.

Hal forcefully focused his consciousness on his own heart. This was the organ that had merged with the heartmetal of the Crimson

Queen—Hinokagutsuchi in the past—a month ago.

"I'm counting on you. Serve as my limbs, Queen!"

After Hal shouted with all his strength, a crimson dragon immediately appeared in front of him.

This was the most ferocious entity known to Hal. Not only did the body exceed twenty meters in length, but the head also had nine golden horns standing upright like a crown, the chest area had ossified into an exoskeleton that shone with golden light.

Hal activated the "power to control the Crimson Queen" which he had obtained a month earlier together with the heartmetal.

"Hmm? Could the Crimson Queen have survived to this day... No."

Witnessing the return of the former dragon king, the Draconian chain user muttered quietly.

"Not only has the Tyrannos stolen the Rune of the Bow but also her remains. What a heartrending story."

"Screw that! It was a legitimate deal with mutual agreement!"

With a shout, Hal activated the will to attack.

The Crimson Queen instantly swung her right forelimb. The five sharp claws slammed down at the chain user, ready to tear him apart.

The enemy defended differently against this attack.

The Draconian chain user's body suddenly expanded, turning back into a dragon's form. Using his forelimb, he pushed the queen's sharp claws away.

"Now that I have to face the Crimson Queen, a corpse she may be... I must take to the battle in my former appearance."

The chain user used an elite dragon's body and stance to declare boldly.

A body surface of gray. In terms of physique, he seemed more delicate than any elite that Hal had encountered so far, but there was no impression of weakness at all. The aura exuded would be more akin to that of a slim but sharp blade.

And by the gray dragon's side—

A gigantic chain matching the size of his massive body, arched in a sickle shape like a snake's neck, coiled around his body.

"This pressure... Can only be matched by the white dragon king encountered last time."

Luna Francois murmured stiffly.

The gray dragon's elite body was shrouded in strong magical power. Combined with the ferocity and stern dignity exuded from his entire body, he did not seem inferior to Princess Yukikaze or the Crimson Queen at all.

So the enemy was dragon king-class after all—?

Hal frowned intensely. Although he had resurrected the Crimson Queen successfully, it was only temporary. Although he was not an Ultra warrior from a certain Land of Light, the combat duration was limited to only three minutes or so.

Beyond this time limit, the queen's body would naturally crumble.

Aware of the odds stacked against him, Hal suddenly felt the magic gun in his hand vibrate. A warning—No, the "wand" serving as his guide to the magic wanted to tell him something?

It was almost like a reminder to him to further discern the enemy's true nature—

Just as Hal focused his eyes to stare, the gray enemy spoke up, "O Tyrannos of the Bow, let us postpone this battle and select an alternative time. I also request this as a gesture of respect towards the queen's remains that you control."

Five runes of Ruruk Soun appeared in front of the gray dragon.

This arrangement signified "shadow transformation." Soon after, his gigantic body turned into black mist, instantly dissipating his physical form.

"You are the puppeteer who controls the false queen. I am but a shadow of a past dragon king. With neither side completely prepared, there is no haste to decide the victor between us..."

"You call yourself the shadow of a dragon king? What is your name

—"

"I am the Gray Aristocrat. Chase after me if that is your intent, but I shall strike back mercilessly. All the female dragons in your possession shall become mine after I defeat you, a perfectly welcome outcome..."

The black mist, still a dragon ten-odd seconds earlier, slowly moved out to sea.

What lay ahead of him was the Dragon Palace Court, the magnificent palace built on top of a island-like carapace, the minion that had been serving the Crimson Queen until eight centuries ago.

After introducing himself as the Gray Aristocrat, the chain user drifted into the palace in the form of mist.

Now that Orihime and Akuro-Ou had been abducted by that dragon(?), Hal was confronted by a development completely different from his anticipations before setting off on this expedition.

Chapter 5 - Battle at the Dragon Palace Court

Part 1

Bound by the dragonslaying chain, Juujouji Orihime became a captive.

The instant she was captured by the gray Draconian by a technique of assured annihilation, her vision went dark, but—

As soon as she opened her eyes, she was greeted by a vast sky filled with stars.

Orihime slowly got up. She did not know how much time had gone by, but it seemed like she had been sleeping. By the time she noticed, she found herself on a stone-paved road. This seemed to be somewhere at a plaza.

In the surroundings were a number of wooden buildings.

Each building was grand and luxuriant. Rooftops were adorned with golden glazed tiles. Carvings of dragons and phoenixes were everywhere. White jade was used abundantly as stone for construction. Evocative of ancient Chinese architecture, the buildings seemed quite similar to the view of the Dragon Palace Court witnessed at the shore earlier.

Next, Orihime began to examine her own body. The bath towel wrapped around her was about to fall off, so she hastily fastened it.

"Sure enough, I've been taken to Kagutsuchi-san's castle...?"

Orihime had just woken up, so her thoughts were still hazy.

Then she noticed. She was not the only one present at the plaza.

The ten-odd-meter long white nine-tailed fox-wolf's massive body was also lying on the ground. A long and thick metal chain was wrapped around her neck and body several times over, imprisoning her securely.

"Akuro-Ou!"

Her partner called out softly in response to Orihime's cry.

Akuro-Ou's voice and demeanor were very grim, clearly not in a

good mood. Orihime stood up and tried to walk over to the giant white body when a clang was heard at her feet.

Like Akuro-Ou, she had been restrained too. Not only that, the other end of the prisoner's chain was held in the gray Draconian's hand—

"You have woken? Priestess of the mortal race."

The Draconian chain user spoke in a gloomy voice.

"I am your new owner—The Gray Aristocrat. Offer your body and your life in totality to me."

"Th-The Gray Aristocrat?"

Another elite dragon Tyrannos—or dragon king—had arrived.

Meanwhile, a breeze blew by, carrying the smell of the sea. The gigantic dreadnought-class turtle with a magnificent palace on its carapace was presumably floating leisurely in the ocean under the night sky.

While in doubt, Orihime asked, "You call yourself my owner. What do you intend to do with my Akuro-Ou?"

"A foolish question. The blood of female dragons is a rare panacea. You need not worry about a lack of uses."

The Gray Aristocrat looked at the captured Orihime and Akuro-Ou.

"To confirm the identity of the one making suspicious summons, I tried sending a minion to investigate—and ended up encountering the Tyrannos of the Bow. A rather unfortunate turn of events. However, considering this good opportunity allowed me to obtain precious female dragon blood, I suppose it was fortunate too."

"Blood—"

Orihime remembered. Several months earlier, an elite dragon had captured her cousin Hazumi and her partner Minadzuki, just like her current situation.

At the time, the severely injured Soth had recovered by drinking Minadzuki's blood.

(In other words, this dragon aims to do the same? But he clearly

doesn't look injured?)

The questions and thoughts in Orihime's mind accelerated.

Naturally, she had no intention of obediently giving blood to help the Gray Aristocrat. She wanted to find an opening to escape with Akuro-Ou, but the problem was—

The Gray Aristocrat was holding the chain imprisoning Orihime.

His left hand was free but he opened and closed it repeatedly. Every time the Gray Aristocrat opened his palm, the five clawed fingers would move restlessly, as though doing warm-ups. Warm-up exercises for tearing apart the human before him—

Orihime tried to imagine.

If the very mysterious Gray Aristocrat was planning to hold the blood extraction ritual *now* instead of *some day*, trying to find an opening would be virtually impossible. Furthermore, he was also staring at Orihime intently with morose eyes like a mad scientist about to perform a dissection experiment!

"Uh, can I ask a question just out of curiosity? When is that ritual scheduled to begin...?"

"The creation of the Ruruk Soun magic circle for performing the ritual is in progress. It might reach completion before daybreak perhaps..."

Orihime asked her question in trepidation but the Gray Aristocrat answered with surprising honesty.

However, what she received was a most ominous result. Orihime hastily tried to make a suggestion.

"I-I think rushing things would be bad, don't you agree? Think about it, Haruga-kun—my friend—might be invading this place to take me back, right!?"

"This possibility is within my expectations. When the time comes, I shall simply intercept him accordingly."

The Gray Aristocrat's low voice was gloomy yet calm and staid.

A crisis with no way out for Orihime seemed to be brewing without impediment. The ritual would most likely be held several hours

later. Orihime gulped and held her breath.

After Orihime's abduction and the Gray Aristocrat's retreat, roughly two hours passed. Dawn had yet to arrive.

The Dragon Palace Court slowly advanced across the ocean during the night, gradually leaving the island.

The magnificent palace had been erected on its carapace. Its only illumination was the faint moonlight and starlight cast down from the night sky.

However, this world was different from urban environments. There were no artificial light sources to blind one's eyes.

The Dragon Palace Court's scenery was filled with dreamy light. This was plenty bright enough.

Hal and Luna Francois were on a corner of the Dragon Palace Court—near the giant turtle's hip connected to the left hind leg.

"At first glance, my impression is that the area is roughly fifteen times that of the Tokyo Dome from the last century. At a rough estimate, there are eight hundred to a thousand buildings."

"The scale is comparable to the Forbidden City at Beijing."

Both of them showed very focused expressions. The infiltration operation was halfway through. They needed to search the Dragon Palace Court's interior and rescue the abducted Juujouji Orihime without the enemy discovering them—

Within the premises whose area covered fifteen Tokyo Domes was neatly organized city with perpendicular roads intersecting like lines on a chessboard.

The large number of buildings were sufficiently spaced out, allowing for excellent visibility.

"Anyway, let's first locate Juujouji and Akuro-Ou."

Hal used a number of searching spells such as Enemy Detection and Sense Magical Power.

However, he did not get any result because the entire Dragon Palace Court had been enchanted with magic to interfere with

magical means of searching and detection.

"He is called the Gray Aristocrat, isn't he? Of course, he must have cast this magic... Looks like he intends to intercept us inside this Dragon Palace Court," replied Luna Francois.

In fact, back when the Gray Aristocrat vanished, Hal had froze for a minute or two.

'Harry! Let us sneak in over there straight away!' Luna had said to him immediately at the time.

The Dragon Palace Court was capable of moving anywhere freely across the vast ocean. Once lost, it would be very hard to pick up its trail quickly again. If they wanted to rescue Orihime as quickly as possible, there was no time to waste here.

Luna's suggestion was clearly based on this reason.

Hence, Hal and Luna attempted to infiltrate the Dragon Palace Court.

Luna had shrunk Glinda to minimum size for her and Hal to ride. Hal also cast his specialty spells, Sound Suppression, Visual Interference and Olfactory Nullification, contributing to the stealth operation's success.

Haruga Haruomi was in possession of a dragon king-class heartmetal as well as this "wand," the magic gun.

Probably thanks to them, Hal had somehow become able to cast spells at a level approaching the strength of elite dragons, as long as it was magic he specialized in.

Glinda flew silently and approached the Dragon Palace Court that was moving away from the island.

She delivered Hal and Luna Francois to the destination safely.

Furthermore, the three-headed lion had de-materialized and was no longer by their side. Hal said to the only person accompanying him, Luna Francois, "Let's celebrate our successful infiltration of the enemy camp first. If this crazy huge turtle dives into the sea, we're going to be helpless."

"The Dragon Palace Court is quite massive," Hal's magic gun

suddenly whispered. It was Hinokagutsuchi's voice.

"Consequently, its movements are very slow too. Simply reaching the outer sea will take a long time."

During the battle against the Gray Aristocrat, Hinokagutsuchi had banished her consciousness to strengthen the magic gun. She had apparently woken up at some point.

At this moment, Hal noticed something.

There was a transparent force field deployed around the Dragon Palace Court, as though shrouding the gigantic body.

Very similar to imperishable protection—Hal recalled the pearly defensive field that he was able to use.

In fact, this seemed to be a similar magical barrier. Once the surrounded by the transparent force field, the Dragon Palace Court started to sink gradually into the sea.

Blocked by the force field, the seawater could not reach the interior of the palace.

By the time they noticed, the Dragon Palace Court's gigantic body was fully submerged in the sea.

Until just now, Hal and company still had the starry sky over their heads. Now, it was replaced by seawater that shone faintly from the moon and the stars' light. The Dragon Palace Court was apparently moving slowly just under the sea surface.

The Dragon Palace Court seemed even more fantastical than under direct moonlight.

Even so, Luna Francois' quiet comment was ordinary and mundane.

"The seawater isn't flowing in despite the entire place submerging. Oxygen is definitely maintained too."

"It's already amazing how wooden buildings from a thousand years ago have been preserved this perfectly. I can't believe the waterproof function and air-conditioning equipment are both flawless. Definitely a great bargain for its price."

"Let me state for the record, brat. Imperishable protection can achieve the same thing."

Hal's comment was equally unimaginative. On the other hand, Hinokagutsuchi provided a piece of trivia.

At this moment, the blonde witch coughed to clear her throat and change the subject.

"It is very likely that the Gray Aristocrat is waiting for us inside the palace, isn't it? Meaning that he reasoned that he could win inside the Dragon Palace Court even though he had clearly avoided a showdown against Harry just now. Why is that?"

"Now that you mentioned it, I think he called himself 'the shadow of a dragon king' or something like that."

"Hmph. A witty way of putting things but simply stated, he is no different from I."

"...Oh!"

Hal nodded after listening to Hinokagutsuchi. Another sloppy hint, but at least the riddle was not too difficult to figure out.

"The Gray Aristocrat could be considered my longtime friend. I heard that he had met his demise somewhere far away a long time ago... But apparently not."

"So just like you, he refuses to accept death gracefully huh?"

"Indeed. With this, it is now deducible why the Gray Aristocrat has chosen to make this Dragon Palace Court his residence."

"It's more comfortable to stay at a place where magical power is concentrated? Like the Witch Mansion at Shin-Kiba where you used to live before encountering me..."

"Not only that, but he most likely has the Dragon Palace Court's heartmetal in his grasp."

Hal tried to imagine. The Dragon Palace Court was the same kind of super creature as Genbu-Ou, so its heartmetal was able to produce massive amounts of magical power. In other words, was the Gray Aristocrat planning to use this power to intercept Haruga Haruomi?

Luna Francois nodded too.

"This is why the Gray Aristocrat retreated so readily, hoping to lure Harry to this place. He believes that it would be advantageous

instead to shift the battlefield to the Dragon Palace Court..."

"Isn't that like a boxer who's bad at footwork...?"

A boxer deprived of the functionality of his legs would be forced to engage at close range in a clumsy exchange of blows. Precisely because of that, the Gray Aristocrat would temporarily retreat from Hal's presence, returning to his home field for an advantage.

"This is all that I have noticed. The rest is up to you two."

The magic gun fell silent again as Hinokagutsuchi's consciousness returned to slumber.

Hal first began to ponder the massive palace's layout.

The Dragon Palace Court was standing on top of a spacious carapace. At the center were several palace buildings that looked like they would be used for administrative purposes. Near the base of the giant turtle's neck were close to ten small palaces packed together densely in a line, probably the harem built for the queen.

"To conquer this dungeon, there's no way to skip through the process."

"Indeed. Orihime-san and Akuro-Ou's situation is worrying, so I really wouldn't want to spend time exploring a maze."

"However, a dragon probably won't be using the captured Juujouji as a hostage."

"It's only during times like these that I feel grateful that elite dragons are so obsessed with battle..."

At this moment, Hal sat down on the ground instead.

Rather than moving recklessly, he needed to think first. Luna probably thought the same thing as Hal. She sat down next to Hal, stretching out her slender and pale legs.

"We should avoid engaging the Gray Aristocrat in combat now that he has returned to home turf. He is probably able to extract magical power from the Dragon Palace Court's heartmetal to fully bring out a former dragon king's power."

"However, this 'reliance on the heartmetal' is also the enemy's weakness," Hal pointed this out and shrugged.

"Although we don't have enough manpower to take advantage of openings."

"Even if you can materialize the Crimson Queen, Harry, the operational duration isn't long."

Luna Francois remarked softly with what seemed like a sulking expression.

She was probably unhappy with the current situation where she still could not contribute to combat potential when facing a dragon king-class opponent. However, Luna's expression suddenly relaxed and she cast a probing gaze at Hal.

"Hey Harry, lately it seems like you've been getting tired easily, right?"

Part 2

"I've been staying up every night because of too many things to do recently."

Hal fell silent for a while before replying.

Hal took care to make his tone as laid back as possible because he had sensed a vague idea of Luna Francois' intent in asking this question. However, the blonde witch continued, "That's something only an older man in his thirties or forties would say. However, Harry, you are only a teenage boy. At your age, you should be able to work for at least half a year sustained by two-hour naps, right?"

"That type of work environment would be too exploitative, right? It's not like I'm a manga artist or working at a game company."

"Rather than overwork or life habits, would obtaining the 'queen's power' be the biggest factor contributing to your state of fatigue?"

"....."

"The start of your tardiness at school also coincided with the conclusion of the battle against Princess Yukikaze."

Luna jokingly directed the conversation in another direction then cut straight to the chase.

Hal himself had suspected the same possibility too. However, he felt very hesitant about discussing the matter with his comrades, which was why he could not make up his mind to bring it up.

Hal fell silent and placed his hand on his chest.

The heartmetal that used to reside within the Crimson Queen was now located here.

"More verification is required for that issue, so let us talk about something else first. However, Harry, when the time is ripe, you must confront this problem properly, okay? I will do everything I can to assist you when the time comes."

"...Thanks."

"In any case, it would be best to avoid using the queen's power indiscriminately. Keep it in reserve as a trump card for critical moments, do you understand?"

The witch who was supposed to be crafty and calculating was being considerate in a very humane manner. Perhaps feeling embarrassed about that herself, Luna Francois sounded slightly displeased in her tone.

Hal found this a little strange. At the same time, he could not help but grin.

More clever than anyone, Luna only showed awkwardness in times like these—

"By the way, Harry, were you looking at my legs just now?"

"Huh!?"

Luna suddenly tossed out a bomb, putting Hal in a state of confusion.

The two of them were seated side by side on a temple's stone steps to chat.

Hal was sitting cross-legged while Luna had her legs outstretched. During this time, Hal always faced forward with a serious look on his face except that his gaze would unintentionally drift to the side.

Because the blonde beauty next to him kept entering his field of vision.

Luna Francois was wearing her trademark outfit—a black one-piece dress with short sleeves.

Beneath the dress was a purple camisole. The bold low-cut neckline was very seductive indeed, but the high-slit skirt was also very important.

Exposed from the high slit were her pale and voluptuous thighs as well as her striking and slender bare feet.

Furthermore, Luna was wearing cool sandals appropriate for summer instead of shoes. As a result, Hal could also see Luna's toenails, painted beautifully pink and perfectly pedicured...



"Th-This is a man's nature, to be attracted like bees to honey!"

Hal reflexively explained to Luna who was showing an aghast look.

"But didn't you mention before? You said that enjoying skinship was also part of the lovers game. Since that's the case, my behavior just now shouldn't be any problem at all—"

"That was just business talk, merely one of hundred lies I told to deceive you, Harry."

Luna's beautiful face scowled in displeasure, causing Hal to stare dumbfounded.

"You admitted it so readily!? Oh well, I did expect that to be most likely the case."

"Even so, Harry, you still leered at my beautiful legs. Not only that, you even committed the atrocious act of violating my precious naked body with your lewd stares like a beast at the open-air hot spring. Given such truly deplorable behavior, you ought to be called an utter scumbag."

"You don't have to reject my character that much..."

"Let alone reject, I can even assassinate your character without the slightest weight on my conscience, you know?"

Despite the smile hanging on the corners of her lips, Luna's eyes were filled with disdain and silent fury.

"Only if I encounter a man of astronomically unlikely perfection and I happen to be in the mood, would I permit a man to admire my artistic masterpiece of a body... And to think you dared to steal a glimpse under those circumstances, you are truly a thief, Harry. I should simply call my lawyers to sue you."

"It's not like I stole something from you..."

Hal muttered poignantly and asked Luna, "By the way, what kind of man would be okay in your view?"

"I am not picky on appearances. Conversely, a man must not be deficient in any of the following areas: age, talent, quick wits, status, wealth, open-mindedness. Furthermore, I would not even consider anyone who won't allow me to live freely as I please."

"Do men like that actually exist on Earth!?"

"I don't care. Even if I have to spend my life single, I am totally fine with it."

Confronted with the girl and her free-flowing opinions, Hal spontaneously found himself smiling wryly.

The witch's speech was obnoxious and her personality could hardly be described as gentle. Luna Francois had finally abandoned her deliberate facade of friendliness to offer harsh words to Hal.

But incredibly, Hal found it easier to get along with her this way

than when her attempts at "seduction."

Probably because this could be considered a state of honesty in a certain sense.

Indeed, whether Hal or Luna, they were mutually—At that very instant, Hal was suddenly certain. It might be possible now.

He extended his right hand at the girl sitting beside him.

The Rune of the Bow appeared in his palm. Looking at Hal's palm, Luna Francois made a look of comprehension. Then after slight hesitation, she silently reached out with her left hand—

Their hands joined together.

Immediately, the Rune of the Bow surfaced on the back of Luna's left hand. The covenant was established.

"Somehow, it feels so easy to the point of anti-climactic..."

"But the process was very convoluted."

The witch whispered weakly whereas Hal shrugged his shoulders. However, his thoughts accelerated all at once now that he had acquired new combat potential.

In the next instant, the two of them got up almost simultaneously and spoke swiftly.

"Luna, perfect timing. Let's reward him with a spectacular attack."

"Harry, let us pressure the enemy by employing an attack with maximum firepower. Even though we don't know the Gray Aristocrat and Orihime-san's location, all we need to do is draw him out."

It was a rare opportunity for them to have been invited to the enemy camp.

In that case, they ought to use this situation to raise hell in the enemy's home ground. Fortunately, they already possessed the necessary firepower for that—The plans that the two of them hatched independently were apparently the same.

Sure enough, Haruga Haruomi and Luna Francois were very alike.

Reminded of this fact again, the two of them smiled simultaneously.

"Looks like there is no need for a prior discussion. Let's do it, Harry!"

Having finally obtained the dragonslaying rune, Luna Francois raised her left hand high.

"O stars! Retrieve my magic from beyond the end of the rainbow! While materializing, Glinda, raise your pseudo-divinity to critical point and prepare to activate a technique of assured annihilation!"

A pentagram appeared overhead, turning into an infinity sigh before transforming into a magic beast.

An orange lion with three heads—Glinda the "Good Witch of the South." On Glinda's right shoulder was a dragon head while the left shoulder had a black goat head. A platinum rune suddenly manifested on each of the foreheads of the three heads.

A line running through a tilted half moon—The Rune of the Bow.

Hovering in midair, Glinda unleashed her magical power completely to enter a combat ready stance. Caught in the wake, the stealth magic that Hal and Luna had carefully cast was dispelled.

But that was fine because they no longer intended to hide their tracks.

Glinda flew lightly and moved to the sky over the center of the turtle's carapace.

Directly below was a particularly magnificent palace.

Using the Forbidden City at Beijing for a comparison, it would probably be analogous to the Hall of Supreme Harmony, the center of the imperial court where numerous rituals had been held in the name of generations of Chinese emperors throughout the Ming and Qing dynasties.

"The target is the heartmetal of Dragon Palace Court—inside this overly huge turtle."

"However, the Dragon Palace Court is a creature belonging to the same lineage as Genbu-Ou but ten times bigger... Since the same ratio might apply to its durability too, we must use the strongest

trump card after all. Harry, let me use *that*."

"Don't tell me you want to use the 'sun-shooting divine bow'? But that'll consume a ton of your magical power too, you know?"

Among all the techniques of assured annihilation available to them, the sun-shooting divine bow was undoubtedly the strongest single attack.

"Even by ordering Rushalka to Double Cast pseudo-divinity, Asya barely squeezes out enough magical power required to meet the minimum requirements. Luna, I think it'll render you unable to fight afterwards."

"But this is essential. Besides, I believe you have an ace up your sleeve, Harry, don't you?"

"What are you referring to?"

"Orihime-san is a Level 3 witch. Unlike Asya and I, who are Level 5, she shouldn't be able to Double Cast freely. By my reasoning, there is some kind of secret skill to allow her to use the sun-shooting divine bow—Am I wrong?"

Hal did not expect Luna to have noticed a secret privy only to Hal and Orihime.

Nothing less should be expected from the brilliant Luna Francois. Hal was very impressed.

"I must not exhaust my power at a time like this. Please, Harry!"

Faced with Luna's repeated requests, Hal hesitated.

Her point was very right and logical. Hal had no reason to object at all. However, to put that method into action on Luna's body...

Doubt and reluctance shook Hal in the inside intensely.

However, Luna still continued to prepare for the attack during this time.

"Glinda! On my mark, fire a magical shot with maximum firepower!"

Ruohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh...

Glinda growled from overhead to respond to her partner.

Despite being her low voice, there was unshakable willpower conveyed. The three-headed lion seemed very happy for the chance to strike back at last. In that case—There was no choice but to do it.

Making his decision, Hal positioned himself behind Luna.

He slowly reached out with his right hand, circling his arm around to Luna's front side.

Then he grabbed the bust that the American-born witch frequently showed up—its left side—using his right hand with the Rune of the Bow appearing on his palm.

"Huh?"

Luna Francois reacted very uncharacteristically—she mumbled in shock.

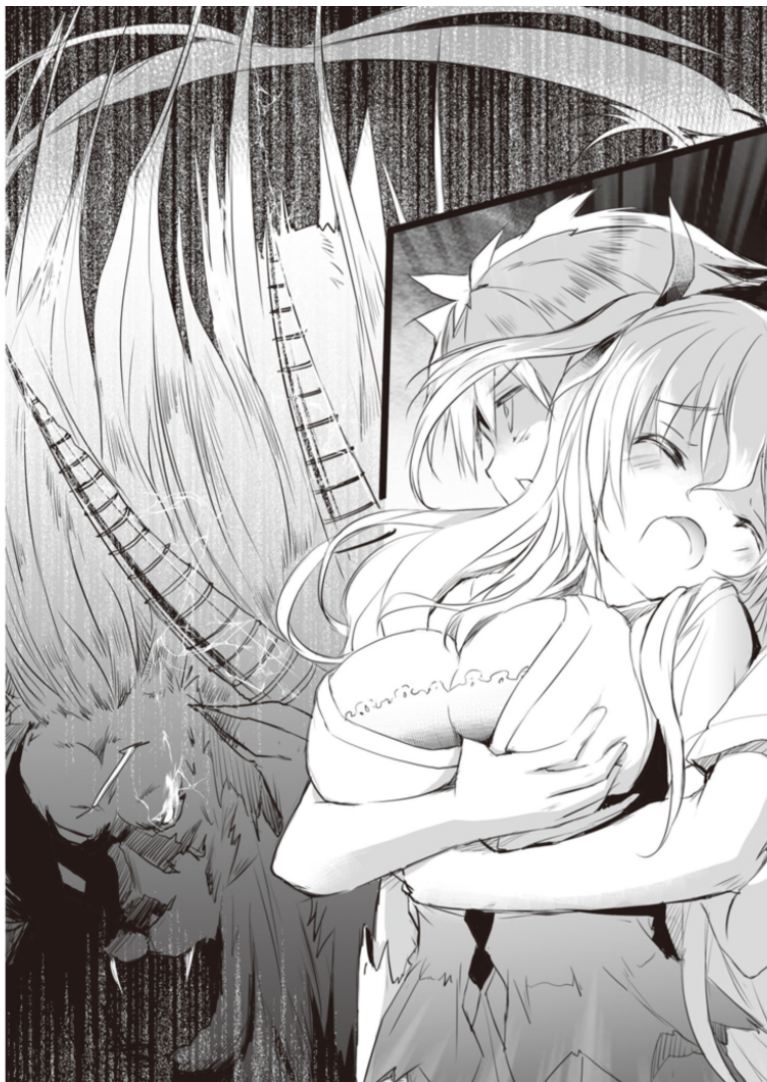
Meanwhile, Hal squeezed harder with his right hand.

The soft sensation and the volume tightly pressed against his palm. The size was unbelievable. Not only that, it was pushing Hal's palm and fingers back with its wonderful elasticity.

Most likely, it had reached a realm that required the English letter "G" to describe...

Hal analyzed with heartfelt emotion while transferring massive magical power through his right palm.

Naturally, the destination was Luna Francois' heart in her left chest.



"Kyahhh!?"

The ear-splitting scream emitted from Luna's lips became the signal.

Hal's magical power was transmitted to Glinda through the witch's heart. Including the black goat head and the dragon head, the lion leviathan's heads roared in unison.

Ruooooooooooooooooohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!

In the next second, the gigantic lion's entire body became enveloped in burning flames.

Two *black arrowheads*, almost the same size as Glinda, manifested

on her left and right. Also wrapped in crimson flames, the arrowheads turned into gigantic arrows of fire.

Next, the blazing Glinda and the arrowheads flanking her charged forward like three arrows.

Towards the ground where Hal and Luna were standing—the super gigantic turtle monster, Dragon Palace Court. To penetrate the incredibly hard carapace, Glinda burrowed deeply into the humongous body's interior.

As though digging a tunnel to reach the Dragon Palace Court's heart, to pierce the heartmetal—

That was the job required of Glinda and company.

Part 3

"Hmm. One set of preparations is completed."

The Draconian user of the dragonslaying chain, the Gray Aristocrat, muttered to himself.

He was still at the plaza where Orihime and Akuro-Ou were imprisoned. However, something that previously did not exist on this plaza had been born.

A transparent triangular prism, roughly thirty meters tall.

After meditating for a long time, the Gray Aristocrat had slowly used high-level magic of Ruruk Soun. The triangular prism suddenly grew out of the plaza's stone-paved floor.

Orihime had seen a structure in a triangular prism like this before.

It was a magical pillar that had captured Shirasaka Hazumi's "serpent"—Minadzuki.

By absorbing the serpentine leviathan's blood, the transparent triangular prism, which could be considered a mini-Monolith, took on a deep red color to become a mystical elixir for healing the elite dragon Soth—

"Y-You're planning to use that thing to suck Akuro-Ou's blood after all!?"

"You know of it, Priestess? Indeed you are correct. I shall use this to store female dragon blood, which will undoubtedly prove useful when I *resurrect* my past body..."

Her suspicions confirmed, Orihime was greatly shaken.

However, a minute or two after the mini-Monolith appeared, she noticed a familiar magical beast in the air.

It was Glinda. Furthermore, she was equipped with black arrowheads—weapons formed by manifesting the Rune of the Bow's power—and enveloped in flames completely!

Of course, the Gray Aristocrat also noticed Glinda's flaming lion

form.

"Tyrannos of the Bow, you came as expected."

Glinda and the two arrowheads were hovering two hundred meters over Orihime's location.

Directly underneath her was a magnificent palace, ostensibly the Dragon Palace Court's cardiac chamber. Thus, Glinda and the two arrowheads suddenly rushed downwards like arrows.

Wrapped in flames, the lion first collided with the palace below.

The ancient Chinese-style building exploded, blown away by Glinda. Without losing speed or momentum at all, Glinda continued onward underground—or rather, the interior of the Dragon Palace Court's carapace.

"In that case, I must intercept in full force..."

The Gray Aristocrat muttered gloomily to himself before his entire body crumbled into dust.

In the next instant, the ground began to shake intensely. Standing there, Orihime went "kyahh!?", lost her balance and fell on her bottom.

Judging from the intensity of the tremor, it was probably 5 or 6 on the Richter scale.

However, the earthquake only lasted for ten-odd seconds.

"Owwwwww... Haruga-kun and Luna-san have come to rescue me."

Enduring the pain from her bottom, Orihime felt greatly relieved.

Also, she noticed that the chain binding her ankle had disappeared. It had apparently vanished at the same time as when the Draconian Gray Aristocrat collapsed his form.

Taking a closer look, she noticed that the chain restraining Akuro-Ou had suddenly disappeared too.

"Is that gray dragon no longer nearby? What do you think, Akuro-Ou?"

The white fox-wolf shook her nine tails, stood up and went

"kuoooooooo!" As her partner, Orihime understood that Akuro-Ou was responding in affirmation.

"Then with that, there is only one thing to be done..."

Orihime nodded at Akuro-Ou.

Although she had no idea what exactly had happened, in any case, she was free. More importantly, her friends had come to this Dragon Palace Court to pick her up. She must find a way to meet up with them!

"Akuro-Ou, try firing a beam into the air! Also howl at the sky like a dog to tell them we're here. Thanks!"

Hal and Luna Francois finally fired the sun-shooting divine bow.

Before shooting the divine bow, twenty-one runes of Ruruk Soun had appeared behind Glinda's back, signifying "I will fire the sun-shooting divine bow at the sky, to exterminate the sun."

This was ultra advanced scripture that served as a mantra for recording this technique of assured annihilation.

In this manner, Glinda and the two arrowheads shot through the Dragon Palace Court's sturdy carapace while enveloped in scorching flames, drilling deep into the Dragon Palace Court's depths like digging a tunnel.

Meanwhile, Hal was standing on the ground—more precisely, on the turtle carapace.

However, even though the scorching arrows were out of sight, Hal still knew that it was hurtling towards the Dragon Palace Court's heartmetal as though he were seeing it with his own eyes. This was also a privilege enjoyed by the marksman of the divine bow.

Glinda and the two arrowheads reached the Dragon Palace Court's cardiac chamber.

Matching the size of a kilometer-long super creature, it was as big as the Tokyo Dome in the human world. At the very center was a sphere roughly ten-odd meters in diameter.

The sphere was dark green. This was the Dragon Palace Court's

heartmetal.

Thus, using Glinda and the two arrowheads as arrows, the sun-shooting divine bow fired at the heartmetal.

However, a counterweighted chain suddenly appeared in front of the heartmetal. Naturally, this was the dragonslaying chain of the Gray Aristocrat. The chain traced out a evil-vanquishing symbol of the pentagram. The pentagram turned into a barrier, blocking Glinda and the two arrowheads to withstand the divine bow's power.

Raging wind and blazing fire scattered. Despite Glinda's best efforts, trying to break through the pentagram chain—

She still could not prevail.

The pentagram chain was probably imbued with a technique of assured annihilation that particularly strengthened magical defense.

Eighteen runes of Ruruk Soun also appeared nearby as though surrounding the pentagram.

The arrangement signified "O guardian stars, grant me protection swiftly." Even the divine bow could not possibly obliterate the chain's magical barrier after piercing the Dragon Palace Court's carapace.

Ruohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh...

Unable to destroy the target despite being fired as an arrow, Glinda growled in frustration.

Then Glinda vanished immediately. Dispelling her materialized form, she returned to her covanantee's side.

"Either way, I expected it to be blocked with 80% certainty."

Hal opened his eyes and shrugged.

In order to *visually keep track* of the siege battle inside the Dragon Palace Court, Hal had closed his eyes on purpose. Haruga Haruomi's body was currently still outside the Dragon Palace Court, at the palace on top of the shell.

However, his hand was holding the method to attack the interior of

the Dragon Palace Court.

He casually pointed the magic gun in his right hand at the sky to use Enemy Search and Aim magic.

Hal pulled the trigger, firing in triple burst mode. Three bullets of light flew out swiftly from the muzzle, entering the Dragon Palace Court's cardiac chamber through the hole opened by Glinda.

Only a magical gun could carry out such a ridiculous long-distance shot.

Instead of the Dragon Palace Court's heartmetal, the three bullets of light were targeting the spiritual body hanging around next to it—invisible to the naked eye, a spirit entity that could only be seen using magical sight.

It was the soul of the Gray Aristocrat, a ghost of a former dragon king like Hinokagutsuchi.

Hal closed his eyes again to confirm the bullets' whereabouts. The three bullets of light had been struck down by the iron chain just before piercing the former dragon king.

Naturally, it was the Rune of the Chain. The enemy's defense was ironclad.

"Looks like the Gray Aristocrat intends to hold position for now, standing guard by the heartmetal..."

A tactic abandoning mobility to focus on defense.

Perhaps because the enemy had retreated to the final defense line and gathering all magical power there, it now became possible to use investigative magic inside the Dragon Palace Court. Precisely because of that, Hal could use Enemy Detection to sense his opponent underground.

"Harry, could you lend me that gun?"

"Oh sure. But putting that aside, Luna, now we should be able to find Juujouji—"

As soon as Hal agreed to Luna's request on reflex, Luna Francois snatched the magic gun from Hal's. Raising the gun with both hands, she aimed the 9mm muzzle right at Hal's heart.

"Please finish within thirty seconds should you have any last words. I will abide by your wishes as much as possible. That is, after I shoot and kill you."

"U-Uh, w-why are you doing this!?"

"Do you really need to ask? You have done the unforgivable. You have rudely groped, violated and defiled my chest—my bust—the sacred territory that I have never allowed anyone to touch! To atone for this grave sin, die obediently by my hand!

"Now that you mention it, I did actually do that..."

Breathing heavily, Luna's wrath was clear to see.

Although not as severe as Double Casting, the method used just now would still have consumed plenty of magical power. She should be resting instead. Be that as it may, Luna still used her exhausted body to take the gun and aim at Hal.

On the other hand, Hal was not as tired probably because he was used to it. He instantly explained, "I'd be truly grateful if I could earn your forgiveness by groveling and prostrating myself on the ground while you hit and kick me as much as you like. If possible, let's rule out shoot and kill..."

"After all, Harry, your body won't die from getting shot a few times, right!?"

"You're right... Oh, then please don't at vitals at least..."

Groping so suddenly was overdoing it, as one might expect.

Seeing Luna Francois' eyes flashing with anger, Hal replied subconsciously.

Regret and guilt surged in his heart. Furthermore, he definitely had a ridiculous body such that even falling from hundreds of meters high would only get an "owww..." reaction from him.

Perhaps it did not count as atonement unless he suffered stabs or gunshots.

"Excellent resolve. Then I shall not hold back—!"

"Y-You're acting just like how I predicted, no hesitation at all!"

Luna immediately switched her target to Hal's ear and pulled the trigger.

However, the magic gun's trigger did not budge the slightest. Speaking of which, this handgun was a weapon that only Haruga Haruomi could use.

Holding the useless magic gun, Luna Francois was taken aback in surprise, then—

"Good grief... I can't believe I still cannot take revenge after being subjected to that..."

The blonde witch collapsed helplessly on the ground and began to cry!

"L-Luna?"

"I was molested... Not only that, but groped this way and that so forcefully, a-a-a-a-and in the end, there was even a strange feeling —"

"Huh?"

Luna Francois hung her head and silently wept.

Speaking of which, after using the technique of assured annihilation and Hal's hand had released Luna's heavy bust...

She had gone limp as though intoxicated with alcohol and sat down on the floor. The pale complexion of her beautiful face was faintly blushing while she panted and stared blankly at Hal for quite a while with moistened eyes—

From Luna's expression at the time, Hal could read several kinds of emotions.

Confusion, discomposure as well as something akin to ecstasy. Regardless, Hal decided to apologize to her first.

"Umm... Anyway, I'm sorry. Because I needed to transfer magical power from my rune to Glinda through your heart, it couldn't be helped—"

"You touched my chest for a reason of 'couldn't be helped'!?"

"T-To be honest, I can't deny that I also felt it was a 'rare chance'..."

But no matter what, you're very pretty and attractive, also—"

"What 'also'!? Regardless, it's a perverted and closeted motive, isn't it!?"

"Oh no. Actually, I really like your personality and true nature. Your ways of thinking are similar to mine, so I feel like we're kindred spirits. And even though you're clearly the same type as me (yet different from Asya), you're a reliable girl and elegant young lady. That's something I find very interesting and refreshing."

As a side note, the bracketed words were only said in Hal's thoughts without being sounded aloud, because he felt that it would be inappropriate to bring up other girls in this kind of situation, even if it was Asya.

Hearing Hal's confession, Luna sighed deeply.

"...You are truly a weirdo after all, Harry. Most boys would say 'I was deceived!' as soon as they discover my true nature then flee or lose their temper and cry themselves to sleep."

"It's not like I can't sympathize with them..." said Hal to Luna Francois, whose tears seemed to have ceased.

He glanced at the neckline of Luna's dress—the boldly low-cut part—then said, "Besides, you're probably creating problems by toying with the hearts of those kinds of boys and deliberately wearing revealing outfits to provoke them."

"I don't care! It's fun to toy with those kinds of boys, to have them in the palm of my hand!"

"Just as I thought, your personality is lovely."

"Hmph. And yet you said earlier that you really like me this way."

"I do like you. I consider this aspect part of your charm."

"—!?"

Luna widened her reddened eyes and stared at Hal.

However, what her gaze conveyed was not anger but the light of sensitivity, intellect and passion.

"Age and talent, no problem. Quick wits yet to be confirmed but

promising. Status and wealth would surely grow dramatically henceforth. Unexpectedly open-minded, perhaps. As someone who likes freedom himself, Harry's chances of excessive interference in my life are quite low..."

"L-Luna, what's with you?"

"I am appraising you."

"Huh?"

"Didn't you tell me you 'like' me? I am assessing whether I ought to respond to your proposal and build a stable relationship with you."

"Ehhhhhhh!? Y-You misunderstood me, I meant I 'like' you as a friend!"

When Hal explained himself after the fact, Luna Francois responded coldly, "You dare say that despite ogling me with lustful eyes?"

"....."

"Despite groping my chest and making me feel that way?"

"F-Feel what way exactly!?"

"...Not."

Turning her face away with a blush like a child, Luna Francois was adorable to the point of cheating. Hal could not help but stare mesmerized.

"Probably due to the shocking experience that came without warning, I was struck by an illusion as though our distance had shrunk all at once. I must have mistaken it for fluttering in my heart. Combined with the 'like' word taking advantage of the opening in my mind, it caused me to start having weird thoughts..."

"I-if you've already analyzed yourself to that extent, let's just drop the matter, okay?"

"But I have a feeling that it might not be bad to try allowing myself to take action and go along with this mistaken feeling... Also because of that, I'm starting to feel that it might not be so unthinkable to seriously consider going out with you, Harry."

"....."

"On further thought, I am someone with a twisted personality apart from my scheming ways. Don't you think that we would get along very smoothly if I go out with a unique boy like you?"

Luna Francois was apparently the very decisive type when confronted with issues on this front.

Leaving Hal speechless, she looked at him skeptically.

"However, Harry, you subjected Orihime-san to the same action."

"Oh, how should I put it—Yeah. Pressed by the battle situation, we reached a consensus on many different areas... By the way, isn't it time for you to return my gun?"

Despite her inability to depress the magic gun's trigger, Luna still pointed the muzzle at Hal's heart again. Her gaze was unfocused, which implied that this was more driven by the subconscious than intent to kill.

"No. Lend it to me a while longer. So Harry, I shall tell you this from the start."

"O-Okay."

"I am probably richer than you imagine, Harry, so if you need to pay her alimony, I will fund all of it for you. But suppose you intend to maintain this relationship, then I would request that you and Orihime-san refrain from entering the stage of official marriage. If the two of you were to produce children, I could adopt them into the Haruga-Gregory household."

"W-What?"

"I am a realist. I also know what perverted creatures men are. Forbidding two-timing could end up causing affairs behind my back, which would be infuriating too."

Luna Francois stared intently at Hal and said, "Consequently, I won't force you to break up with her. Conversely, please draw the line properly between you and everyone else. Otherwise, I may very well shoot and kill women who rub me the wrong way. In the event that I fail to control myself, I may even kill you as well, Harry."

"....."

Luna made her declaration while aiming the gun at Haruga Haruomi's heart. On the other hand, Hal simply stood there stunned. At that moment, a beast's call was suddenly heard from afar.

Kuohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh—

A canid beast was howling from several hundred meters away. They had heard this sound before.

"It's Akuro-Ou!"

The instant Hal shouted, a beam of red light shot from a corner of a palace to the sky.

It was like a flare. The light looked as though it was shooting out from near the neck of the giant turtle that was the Dragon Palace Court. A breath beam released from a leviathan's mouth.

"Juujouji must have ordered Akuro-Ou to do that to tell us their location."

"As expected of my rival, I suppose I should say? Hey Harry, I don't want to unnecessarily lose someone like her whose bright future knows no bounds. Please think over what I just said very carefully, okay?"

The headstrong and unreasonable Luna Francois was displaying a refreshingly prim expression.

Part 4

Hal and Luna Francois first made their way towards the beam's source.

There were many palace buildings, but it was not difficult to reach the plaza where Akuro-Ou and Orihime were located by following the continual howling.

"You two came to save me! Thanks!"

"I'm glad we met up successfully... Say, Juujouji, what's with your getup?"

At their reunion, Orihime thanked the two of them, but Hal raised a question.

When abducted by the Gray Aristocrat, all she had was a bath towel wrapped around herself.

Currently, Orihime was dressed in a red garment somewhat like a belly dancer. That being said, it was not proper clothing. She had probably found some silk cloth nearby and wrapped strips of it around her bust then tied a larger piece of fabric around her waist to serve as a skirt.

By tying the fabric tightly to prevent it from sliding off, an impromptu garment was finished.

As a side note, Orihime also had a rectangular piece of silk cloth draped over her shoulder to serve as a shawl.

"B-Because I had no clothing to wear, I went into a nearby building to search. All I could find was this cloth, so I tried to make the best of it..."

Orihime huddled herself in embarrassment and explained to Hal.

The fabric of her new garment was very thin while her belly and navel were totally exposed. This ended up emphasizing her wonderful figure even more. Orihime was probably embarrassed because of that.

However, Hal was very touched. Magnificent.

"Oh no, I think this is well-made. Yes, it's awesome."

"H-Hearing that from a closet pervert like you, Haruga-kun, makes me even more embarrassed!"

"But good stuff is good stuff. Besides, it's not that different from a swimsuit in how much skin is bared..."

"You're right, but this outfit is like cosplay, I find it very embarrassing! I forbid you to check me out!"

While Hal and Orihime were arguing...

Luna Francois suddenly removed her clothing—the black one-piece dress—leaving just the purple camisole underneath. For a girl, this would be quite improper.

Naturally, Hal did not know where to look. Despite the turmoil in his heart, he still found his gaze involuntarily drawn to her.

Luna Francois' figure boasted voluptuousness surpassing Orihime.

"L-Luna-san, what are you doing!?"

"I was thinking I should change to match you, Orihime-san."

In front of the surprised junior witch, the blonde witch in the camisole smiled seductively. Then she winked at Hal and said casually, "How is this, Harry? With this, I don't lose to her at all, do I?"

"Oh no. That goes without saying."



Completely altering her image simply by shedding one article of clothing, Luna's skill was setting Hal's heart pounding.

"B-But this isn't the bedroom, it feels a bit too uninhibited..."

"However, you are the only boy present, Harry. It's not like you're the type to be troubled by the sight of this."

Luna smiled and continued, "Fufu. In order to oppose Orihime-san, who is already a formidable foe simply by acting her usual self, even someone like me cannot be complacent at all. Sure enough, it's essential to maintain a battlefield mindset at all times."

"Formidable foe... Aren't we on the same side?"

Confronted by the rapidly changing human relationships, Hal was at a loss, Luna remained elegant and marching at the beat of her own drum, while Orihime had her head tilted in puzzlement with a wry smile, unable to make heads or tails of the issue.

In a tone of voice too elegant for a declaration of war, Luna Francois continued, "On a professional level, of course. But in private—as one of the ladies hanging around Harry, Orihime-san, you will surely become the most powerful enemy. Let us both do our best, okay?"

"...H-Haruga-kun. Was Luna-san speaking in English just now?"

A rival's sudden declaration apparently made Orihime very flustered. She turned to converse with Hal.

"I-I don't really understand her. Please help me to translate!"

"Don't worry, she was speaking Japanese the whole time. Uh, well, how should I put it...?"

"It is exceedingly simple. Forget about calculations and ploys, I have fallen in love with Harry. Consequently, Orihime-san, you are the boss character, being the girl currently closest to Harry."

"Ehhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?"

Hal empathized completely with Orihime's shock.

To think that such a surreal development could happend suddenly in his life. In a certain sense, it was a surprise no less than the occasion when he obtained his dragonslaying rune.

Meanwhile, Luna Francois continued on her own, calmly.

"By the way, Orihime-san, weren't you restrained?"

"Y-Yes. Until just now, I was still bound by that unbelievable chain. However, it vanished together with the gray Draconian so I signaled to you two."

"That was probably when we were targeting the Dragon Palace Court's heart with the Rune of the Bow."

Hal agreed with Luna's guess.

At the time, the Gray Aristocrat had probably gathered all his magical power to block the sun-shooting divine bow. Due to insufficient magical power, he probably became unable to sustain his Draconian body and the chain, which was also why the interference with investigative magic also ended temporarily.

"In that case, the interloper has gone out of sight—"

After a while, they went back to discussing their original purpose for coming here.

Hal looked at the magic gun that Luna had just returned to him and asked "Are you awake?"

"Now I am. Quit asking me to sleep and wake up. It is very bothersome."

Hinokagutsuchi's voice from the magic gun sounded like a murmur, both displeased and drowsy.

However, she still responded to Hal's demand and told them the required direction, location and target.

Thus, the trio walked for ten-odd minutes—

Hal and company arrived at a beautiful garden. Although there was probably no one in charge of looking after the place, the garden was blooming with a large number of colorful flowers. In a corner of the garden, there was a piece of black stone dropped on the ground.

An uneven stone with almost no curves.

It was very similar to quartz but Hal knew that it was not quartz.

"A flint huh...? A fragment of the flint star to pour power into the conqueror's rune—"

A mystical rock and absolute treasure that all sapient dragons sought after.

The starting point where the dragonslaying adventure revolved around. Haruga Haruomi's father had for some reason hidden this mysterious stone.

Leaving it lying in a corner of a garden like this instead of keeping it in a treasure chest ostentatiously—Should one say that this was

very much in Hinokagutsuchi's eccentric style?

In fact, it probably would not have occurred to them to hunt for treasure here had they not been informed by Hinokagutsuchi in advance.

"This is quite suitable for hiding things as long as you've got the guts to leave it unattended..."

Hal tried to observe the flint using magical sight but could not see anything.

This stone's magical properties could not be detected using such means? Nothing less expected from a secret treasure that proved challenging for dragonkind to find despite their best efforts.

Hal moved the flint and nodded to his companions.

"Akuro-Ou, dig open the ground here. I'm counting on you, make it quick!"

"Glinda, you help out too!"

The white fox-wolf and the three-headed lion materialized in response to the witches' voices.

They were at their smallest size, around three meters in length. Even so, their size and power still far surpassed any domesticated animal in the human world. The quadrupedal beasts, Akuro-Ou and Glinda, used their forelimbs competently, digging up the garden's surface with astounding speed.

Several minutes later, a sarcophagus was unearthed.

The stone lid covering the sarcophagus was very heavy so they had Akuro-Ou use one of her nine tails to move it aside. Inside the sarcophagus was a dried up mummy, except it was not human.

Half human half dragon. It was the mummified appearance of an elite dragon in Draconian form.

"This guy was probably a Tyrannos that had died in battle somewhere in the past. Hinokagutsuchi took his corpse and rune to preserve. This was to have a backup weapon to use in case anything unexpected befell the Rune of the Bow."

Hal looked at the mummy's right hand. On the palm was a cross-

shaped emblem.

After the Bow, the Sword, the Arrow and the Chain, this was the fifth dragonslaying rune that Hal and company had found.

"When robbing a dragonslaying rune from someone by force—even if the target is a corpse—the success probability is only 40%. But for many long years, magic for improving the odds of a transplant has been cast on him..."

"Haruga-kun, then what does that make the probability of success...?"

"Roughly 60 or 70%."

"Judging from the odds, this is not a bad gamble."

Luna Francois heard Hal and Orihime's conversation and nodded. Hal continued, "Yeah. With the goddess of fortune, Juujouji, here this time, I'm very looking forward to it."

"Huh? I am the goddess of fortune? Why?"

"Think about it, during the battle against Galad, it was thanks to seeing *that part* of yours that many things happened smoothly. Coincidentally, yesterday at the open-air hot spring too—"

"Haruga-kun! I will be mad if you say weird things even when Luna-san is present!"

"...I am impressed, Orihime-san. How terrifying of you to gradually increase Harry's affection for you unbeknownst to the rest of us."

"Y-You have it wrong! Hazumi was present at the time too~!"

Listening to the two girls' heated discussion, Hal picked up the flint.

He pressed the flint into the palm of the mummified Draconian's right hand. Whether he could acquire the cross-shaped emblem here would depend on luck and magical power—

Hal needed to pour magical power into the flint in his hand. He took a breath.

"So Harry, what kind of weapon does this rune represent?"

"It's the katana. According to Hinokagutsuchi, this rune is

apparently quite hard to use."

"A katana rune... Doesn't that feel like a relative of the Rune of the Sword?"

Luna's interest was piqued while Orihime stared at the cross-shaped symbol uneasily.

This precise instant was the decisive moment.

As soon as Hal poured in magical power and exerted pressure on the new rune, the flint crumbled into dust while flames enveloped Hal's right arm up to his elbow area...

Then dozens of minutes went by.

Hal and company had reached the deepest level by traveling down the massive tunnel created by the sun-shooting divine bow's shot. Sitting on the miniaturized Glinda's back, he was accompanied by Orihime and Luna Francois.

The mobile fortress, Dragon Palace Court, was a gigantic turtle creature whose size far surpassed normal parameters.

Just as Hal, the shooter of the divine bow, had sensed earlier, the cardiac chamber was as big as the Tokyo Dome.

Since the cardiac chamber's walls and ceiling were glowing faintly, the interior was surprisingly bright. Near the center of the cardiac chamber was a spherical object ten-odd meters in diameter. Its color was deep green. The Dragon Palace Court's heartmetal.

Roughly twenty or thirty narrow tubes were sprouting from the cardiac chamber's floor, entangling and connecting to the heartmetal.

That could very well be the analog to a human's blood vessels.

Hal, Luna and Orihime activated magical sight and looked at the heartmetal's vicinity.

The ghost of the former dragon king, the Gray Aristocrat. His spiritual body was there.

"Just to err on the side of caution, I'll ask this first. Have you ever thought about having a ceasefire now and co-exist with us?"

"Truly a foolish question, Tyrannos of the Bow. Such as gesture would hardly befit the ways of dragonkind."

The gray Draconian materialized and answered Hal.

It was probably a state similar to Hinokagutsuchi's young girl form. Using the precious magical power lingering in his spiritual body, the Gray Aristocrat had restored his living appearance temporarily. Hence, back when he was using all his magical power to defend against the sun-shooting divine bow, this figure had vanished...

"Our fight has begun long ago. So long as you and I are in sound health, do not make any proposal as foolish as a ceasefire."

"I figured. That being said, it's quite bizarre to call a ghost like you sound in health."

"Fufufu. Thank you, Tyrannos. Revived as a spirit, I drifted to this castle, making it my residence, yet several centuries passed during my slumber...It was only due to you and your entourage's calls that I finally awoke..."

"Meaning that you were still dormant until a few days ago?"

Hal really wanted to sigh.

He never expected it was because of their visit that a dragon king was awakened...

"Let me proceed by taking your female dragon minions for myself, to use their blood to synthesize a resurrection elixir. Fufu, this will be the revival of my path of conquest."

"To revive your dragon body? I think that's kind of pointless."

Hal dismissed the former dragon king's declaration and muttered.

"Although I don't know how many portions of elixir you can make from a single leviathan, but no matter what, it'll simply be a resurrection with a time limit, right? If you're going to fight a real dragon king, just surviving one round will take everything you've got."

This was what his magic wand—the magic gun—had told him.

Resurrection elixir. This possessed mystical potency that was even able to resurrect a dragon king's corpse temporarily. However, its

effect was simply on the same level as the magic Hal and Hinokagutsuchi used to revive the queen...

However, the Gray Aristocrat laughed upon hearing him.

"No matter! To lose my life in another battle is my longtime wish!"

"As expected of a dragon king-class enemy. A battle maniac that cannot be measured with common sense."

"It will be dangerous if he targets witches and 'serpents' apart from us, so we must fight here..."

Standing by behind Hal, Luna and Orihime whispered in commentary.

Upon rescuing Orihime successfully, Hal and company could have chosen to retreat. However, the Gray Aristocrat could very likely turn into a source of future calamity. Also, there was the risk that the Gray Aristocrat would launch surprise attacks every night to target "serpents."

Hence, Hal and company had gone out of their way to enter the enemy camp.

"In that case, a fight can't be avoided huh... Juujouji, take a bit of a break first."

"S-Sure!"

"Harry! I am ready to begin any time. Let us proceed!"

Orihime nodded stiffly whereas Luna Francois spoke valorously.

Then the three-headed lion that had materialized at minimum size, Glinda, suddenly expanded, gradually returning to her original size.

Hal shouted loudly, "Crimson Queen! Grant your power to Glinda!"

The giant red dragon, the Crimson Queen, instantly materialized before Hal.

The queen's body merged with the ten-odd-meter-long Glinda, conferring a new form upon the orange-furred three-headed lion.

Ruby armor appeared on Glinda's back and abdomen to solidify her defense.

Next, her left and right flanks were each equipped with a pitch-black cannon.

This was the Queen Form of Glinda, the "Good Witch of the South." From the two cannons on her flanks, projectiles of red light were suddenly shot, a total of two. Naturally, the Gray Aristocrat was the target.

"Oh!? The queen's power has merged with your minion!?"



Pearly light enveloped the Gray Aristocrat's Draconian body.

This was the imperishable protection that only Tyrannos and

dragon kings could use. Glinda's two cannon shots were blocked by this protection.

The Gray Aristocrat laughed fearlessly.

"Hahahaha. In that case, I have no choice but to recover my former visage."

Standing at two meters tall or so, the Draconian's body began to expand.

Within the blink of an eye, the Gray Aristocrat turned into a gigantic gray dragon, ten-odd meters in body length. His upright bipedal standing posture was unexpectedly similar to humans.

He spread the gigantic wings on his back to intimidate Glinda.

However, the enemy's weak point was right before their eyes. Hal motioned to Luna beside him.

"Use that move again from just now. Ignore his actual body."

"Yes. After all, the enemy's lifeline is the Dragon Palace Court's heartmetal. Glinda!"

The Gray Aristocrat was absorbing the magical power produced by the Dragon Palace Court's heartmetal to use as an energy source.

Conversely, it meant that all they needed to do was destroy that energy source. Glinda responded to Luna Francois' command and fired two cannon blasts again.

Naturally, the target was the Dragon Palace Court's heartmetal. The dragonslaying shots hurtled at the gigantic dark-green sphere.

In the next second, the Gray Aristocrat stood sternly in front of the heartmetal, using himself as a shield to withstand the two cannon blasts.

"Hmm."

Surrounded by pearly light, the Gray Aristocrat grunted in pain. Imperishable protection.

Thanks to that protection, the gray dragon's body remained unharmed. However, Hal and company knew that imperishable protection was not a defensive tool that could be used continuously.

Just as they decided to continue the offensive, to force the Gray Aristocrat into staying on the defensive the whole time—

"O runes of Ruruk Soun. Merge this heartmetal with my body!"

"What!?"

The Gray Aristocrat extended his right forelimb and touched the Dragon Palace Court's heartmetal that was within arm's reach.

Twelve runes of Ruruk Soun appeared at the point of contact between his dragon palm and the heartmetal.

This composite arrangement signified triple meanings of "shrink, chew and assimilate."

Hal was very shocked because he saw the ten-odd-meter-diameter heartmetal of the Dragon Palace Court shrink, turning into a size that could fit on the Gray Aristocrat's palm.

Taking the magically shrunken heartmetal, the Gray Aristocrat swallowed it in one gulp.

To completely claim all the magical power produced by the Dragon Palace Court's heartmetal, to hide his weak point within his body, that was why he had swallowed it whole.

"So the same tactic no longer works huh..."

"Harry, then let us settle the battle with him directly!"

The instant Luna cried out, the Gray Aristocrat used new magic.

Eight runes of Ruruk Soun appeared over his sharp-cornered dragon head. The former dragon king said quietly, "The Crimson Queen was known for divine marksmanship. The Red Flame Emperor, his ferocious form in combat. The Black Lightning Emperor, his nefarious machinations and brilliant ploys in the use of magic. All of them are considered the strongest of the strong..."

While listening to the Gray Aristocrat's sudden reminiscing, Hal noticed.

He noticed what the latest arrangement of runes represented. "Fist Mantra Divine Power."

"A mantra of the fist? Meaning that—"

"I am the embodiment of strength, ferocity and intensity... Savor this mighty power carefully!"

The gray dragon jumped high the instant he boasted.

Instead of spreading his wings to fly, he made good use of his leg strength and the entire body's tension to leap. The movement was not only elegant and agile but also faster than the naked eye could capture.

Like a gust of wind, the Gray Aristocrat took a leap, cleverly jumping over Glinda.

Then in this manner, he landed behind the three-headed lion without making a sound.

"Glinda, deploy protection too—"

Impressive as always, Luna issued orders the instant the enemy jumped.

But before she finished her instructions, the Gray Aristocrat had already finished his jumping and landing movement and even attacked.

What followed the sudden jump was a move that did not seem very dragon-like—A roundhouse kick.

The Gray Aristocrat's kicking leg was wrapped in a chain as well. The Rune of the Chain.

Glinda's imperishable protection made it in the nick of time.

Her whole body enveloped in pearly light, Glinda deflected the dragonslaying kick.

Hal felt a sharp pain in his heart at the same time. The damage taken by imperishable protection would sting the user's heartmetal. Furthermore, the Gray Aristocrat did not stop attacking.

In addition to his legs, the Gray Aristocrat started using both hands, wrapped in chains, by the time Hal noticed.

Hence, the second strike was a mid-level punch from his right fist.

The dragonslaying punch attempted to smash through one of Glinda's three heads—the black goat's snout. Next came a second

roundhouse kick aimed at Glinda's right shoulder.

Due to imperishable protection, the lion leviathan remained unharmed, of course.

However, Hal's heart was continually attacked by waves of pain.

"Glinda, strike back!"

Under Luna Francois' orders, the two cannons on Glinda's flanks fired in triple succession.

However, the Gray Aristocrat landed behind Glinda again with an agile maneuver then raised his right fist high. Releasing the chain wrapped around his fist, he swung it down like a whip.

When the chain struck Glinda's protection, Hal's heart was attacked with pain again.

"O Tyrannos of the Bow, this is my style as the Gray Aristocrat. Indulge me a little longer."

Despite being a dragon, he was using moves like unarmed martial arts with free-flowing motions.

Luna Francois murmured partially in surprise, partially impressed, "I am afraid he is using magic for physical enhancement. I never thought there would be martial artists in the world of dragons..."

"The changes are not limited to the runes..."

Orihime leaned closer to Hal's side and whispers.

The repeated pain was making Hal clutch his chest. As soon as he did that, Orihime came to his side. Hal nodded at Orihime, whose worry was shown on her face, then took a deep breath.

The enemy was apparently trickier to handle than expected. However, the match was only just beginning.

Part 5

Asya went up to the deck after she woke up.

She was on the JMSDF's multi-purpose support vessel. It was yesterday at noon when the trio of Haruga Haruomi, Juujouji Orihime and Luna Francois Gregory had disappeared.

After that, over sixteen hours had gone by. Dawn was gradually approaching.

However, the missing trio's whereabouts were still uncertain.

"I believe they shouldn't be in life-threatening danger..." Asya murmured to herself.

The worst-case scenario did not surface in her mind because of her inborn nature of optimism—That was not the entire reason.

At least, between her and Haruomi, there was the magical link called the vassal covenant.

Perhaps in the form of "intuition," that link was telling Asya he was still alive.

That being said, she did not have any clue to find the missing trio. Currently, the ship was moored at one of the Izu Islands—on the coastal waters of Miyake-jima.

Asya had asked the JMSDF to help search for Haruomi and company who had gone missing during the daytime.

However, it did not yield any results. Asya paced back and forth on the deck, frowning. Would a second day's searching turn up any clues?

Soon, 5am would arrive.

The sky was starting to glow. The rising sun gradually peeked out from the eastern horizon.

An emerald serpentine dragon leviathan hovered into the air with a pair of wings shining with golden radiance. It was Minadzuki.

Minadzuki was concentrating, trying to see if magical presences could be detected in nearby waters.

"Hazumi-san, time to switch."

"Oh sure. But Asya-san, may I continue a while longer...?"

The one conversing with Asya was Shirasaka Hazumi, standing in a corner on the deck.

As Minadzuki's partner, the kindhearted girl gazed at the ocean uneasily. Under the morning rays, the Pacific Ocean gained a rosy color.

Hazumi was worried about the missing trio. She would not be able to sleep even if she went to lie down.

Asya nodded silently. Standing side by side with Hazumi, she looked out at the ocean.

"Hazumi-san, please return to Tokyo New Town by the end of today, because the situation has changed. I think at least one witch needs to go back. After all, emergencies could happen over at New Town."

"Y-Yes."

Hazumi nodded in response to Asya's concise notice with a serious expression.

"I'll stay here for a week first to search for them and the octopus-headed monster. No matter what the outcome, I plan on returning to New Town by the eighth day."

"J-Just a week!?"

"Yes. If no clues turn up despite such a long search, I think it'll be time to regroup a bit."

Asya shrugged and tried to explain in as business-like a tone as possible.

"So that's that. Orihime-san seems very resilient while Luna is a talented individual who is destined to live a long time, just like unwanted weeds that just won't die. Haruomi has also turned into someone who can shrug off an elephant's trampling. The situation probably won't get too complicated."

Asya was saying this partially to dispel some of the junior witch's unease.

"Compared to those three, we should worry more about the state of affairs at New Town."

"Y-Yes. Maybe... you are right."

"Besides, with a bit more searching, it's possible we might easily discover that those three had drifted to some uninhabited island."

"L-Like Robinson Crusoe."

"All three of them can use magic and Haruomi is very used to surviving in situations like that. I'd say they've got better odds of survival than the partnership of that guy and Friday."

At that moment, Mindzuki called out "rahhhhhhhhhhh—" as though singing in the air.

Hazumi instantly widened her eyes and looked up at her partner.

"Are you sure, Minadzuki!?"

"What happened?"

"Minadzuki seems to have detected a magical presence! And it's Senpai's—The Rune of the Bow!"

"—! Does Minadzuki have any way of sensing their approximate location!?"

"U-Uh, it seems like the Rune of the Bow is being used some distance away, but the precise position is unclear... But the direction is fine. Minadzuki says it's that way."

Asya looked at the direction indicated by Hazumi and nodded.

It happened to be dawn. The morning sun was rising in the east. Hazumi's index finger was pointed to the south.

Hal and company were currently in a showdown against a martial artist(!) dragon.

The battle had gone one-sided. Glinda kept firing shots at point-blank range but the enemy dodged them one after another. The

Gray Aristocrat's punches and kicks were striking the lion leviathan's body accurately—

This battle had already persisted for more than five minutes.

Wrapped around the gray dragon's hands, the dragon slaying chains were like gauntlets while the chains on his legs served as greaves.

The Gray Aristocrat would unravel the chains around himself from time to time, swinging them as whips.

Every time the Gray Aristocrat landed a blow on Glinda, the imperishable protection would defend her with a pearly glow, preventing the power of dragonbane from harming the three-headed lion.

However, Hal's heart, i.e. his heartmetal, was accumulating damage.

The pain attacking his heart never stopped, greatly disrupting his heartbeat. Were he to look at a mirror, Hal would probably see the reflection of his pallid face. He was also panting out of breath.

In contrast, the Gray Aristocrat remained calm and confident, using his martial arts effortlessly.

He had only used imperishable protection back when protecting the Dragon Palace Court's heartmetal.

"At this rate, Haruga-kun won't last much longer!"

"He's doing quite a number on us, even though I didn't lower my guard just because he looks so drab..."

Hal whispered to Orihime who was watching with bated breath.

Compared to the two ladies, Princess Yukikaze and Hinokagutsuchi, the former dragon king, the Gray Aristocrat, definitely was not the memorable type in first impressions. Rather, he seemed quite drab.

Judging from the fact that his special skill was *martial arts*, perhaps one could still call him drab.

"Well, if he were cast in a battle manga as one of the enemy bosses like the four heavenly kings, I think he'd be the middle-aged martial artist as the only unassuming and unpopular character."

In contrast to her frivolous tone of voice, Luna Francois was staring at the Gray Aristocrat with eyes like burning torches.

However, this difficult battle was within calculations too. When fighting against an opponent who used to be as strong as Princess Yukikaze, it was only natural to be pressed into desperation—

The plan to reverse the unfavorable situation had already been put into motion.

Hal, Orihime and Luna exchanged looks with one another, biding their time for *that instant*.

Then the Gray Aristocrat finally announced.

"O chain of dragonbane, accomplish my dragonslaying quest through a technique of assured annihilation!"

To deliver a finishing blow against the losing Glinda, he released his magical power completely.

The Gray Aristocrat opened his gray dragon jaws wide to release almost thirty chains as though breathing fire.

These chains entangled the imperishable protection defending Glinda.

Sixteen runes of Ruruk Soun also appeared over the Gray Aristocrat's head, signifying "O jailer of heavenly imprisonment and chain of the executioner, accomplish your second mission."

The almost thirty metal chains tightened around Glinda and the imperishable protection together. Hal noticed instinctively.

This was a barbaric move to bind a target's entire body with chains, thereby twisting off the head and limbs.

"Gah—!"

Hal felt a sharp pain in his heart. The dull pain so far was nothing compared to it. As though dozens of thread-like blades were wrapped around the heart, constricting it tightly, trying to chop it into pieces—

He spat out blood, but this was precisely the moment that Hal and his friends were waiting for.

"I'm counting on you two...!"

"Yes! Hold out a while longer, Haruga-kun, I will ease your burden straight away!"

"Glinda, stop using pseudo-divinity! Apply all magical power to strengthen the protection!"

Orihime promised in a firm tone of voice while Luna Francois swiftly issued orders.

The pearl radiance enveloping Glinda—imperishable protection—brightened somewhat. The intense pain attacking Hal's heart also eased a little.

Next, as for the Gray Aristocrat who was binding Glinda with the metal chains—

A nine-tailed wolf-fox suddenly appeared behind his back! Using Glinda's pseudo-divinity of Illusion to make her invisible until now, she had been waiting at the back on standby.

An invisibility spell capable of deceiving even Princess Yukikaze for a moment, they had used the same tactic again.

This was to target the instant when the Gray Aristocrat's defenses were the least secure—when he was using a technique of assured annihilation.

"Draw your *blade*, Akuro-Ou!" Orihime instantly yelled out.

Akuro-Ou was a nine-tailed fox-wolf. The tip of her rightmost tail was equipped with the Katana—a *dragonslaying blade*—that had suddenly manifested.

The slightly curving blade was dignified and beautiful, closely resembling a Japanese sword.

Equipped with the Katana, Akuro-Ou's tail extended like a rubber band, swinging the new weapon like a swordsman's arm to slash the Gray Aristocrat from behind!

"You came after all, white imitation!"

However, the Gray Aristocrat used his tail to catch the blade strike coming from behind.

The elite dragon's long tail writhed like a tentacle with the dragonslaying chain wrapped around it at some point in time. Perhaps the Gray Aristocrat had foreseen that Akuro-Ou would attack.

The chained tail entangled Akuro-Ou's Katana to stop her from attacking again.

However, Orihime gave orders at this moment.

"Akuro-Ou, the second katana! Use it together with fire magic and chop down hard!"

The Gray Aristocrat went "What!?" in surprise.

This was because another Katana had sprouted from the leftmost of Akuro-Ou's nine tails.

The new katana's mildly curving blade was enveloped in crimson flames. Akuro-Ou's tail swung this blazing katana down fiercely, this time severing the wings on the Gray Aristocrat's back without fail!

Dual wielding—Orihime and Akuro-Ou were using two katana at the same time, forcing the former dragon king into desperation.

"Ohhhhhhhhhhh!"

The Gray Aristocrat finally roared in pain and anger.

Seizing this opportunity, Luna Francois issued orders as well.

"Glinda! Double Cast pseudo-divinity—'sun-shooting divine bow'!"

Ruohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!

The lion leviathan possessed the heads of both a black goat and a dragon at the same time.

Mostly on the defensive earlier, Glinda roared courageously in Queen Form, her entire body suddenly covered in blazing flames. The flaming lion turned her own body into an arrow for the burning divine and pounced at the Gray Aristocrat.

"O guardian stars, grant me protection swiftly!"

The metal chain moved rapidly in front of the Gray Aristocrat in an

attempt to trace out a pentagram.

However, the sun-shooting arrow struck the Gray Aristocrat before the pentagram could be finished, thanks to Luna decided to use her strongest attack without a moment's hesitation.

Akuro-Ou also jumped to avoid getting caught in the divine bow's blast.

Thus, the blazing Glinda knocked the enemy's gray body flying straight ahead—

In the next instant, the gray dragon's gigantic body exploded. Thus, the dragon body was blown apart. Left and right forelimbs, the neck and tail all became enveloped in fire, burned completely within the blink of an eye, turned into dust.

Compared to his combat ability, the Gray Aristocrat's defense was clearly weak.

Soon after, the flames extinguished and the surroundings returned to silence.

"The result was like fighting a temporarily revived zombie..."

"Mobility and attack power the same as when he was alive, but single-digit hitpoints at most... That's how it feels..." said Luna Francois in response to Hal's mutterings.

Finally liberated from the pain in his heart, Hal breathed a sigh of relief.

In contrast, Luna's face was pale and she was standing unsteadily, looking like she would fall over any time. This was the price for ordering her "serpent" to Double Cast pseudo-divinity.

Having depleted her entire body's energy, the blonde Shootdown Ace was stuck with symptoms resembling low blood sugar.

Due to her partner's exhaustion, Glinda in Queen Form also began to disappear.

Taking the lion-like partner's place to support Luna Francois, Orihime swiftly rushed over to catch her.

"Are you alright, Luna-san? Let me treat you to some sweets later when we get back. How about the caramel frappucino strawberry

daifuku that they recently started selling at the convenience store in front of the school?"

"Thank you, Orihime-san... But food of such an adventurous nature would be a bit too..."

"Fufu. Haruga-kun said something similar before."

"After all, normal people can't be like Asya..."

The relief of surviving a desperate predicament and the joy of victory seemed to have lightened the two girls' tone.

Hal also nodded vigorously while approaching them.

The dragonslaying bow, which had delivered the mortal blow, and the twin katana that had been instrumental to triggering the reversal. The emblems symbolizing these two types of weapons were now visible on Hal's right hand. First there was the Rune of the Bow on his palm and the cross-shaped Rune of the Twin Katana near his wrist—

A new dragonslaying power obtained thanks to chance and the goddess of fortune.

Dual wielding had many traits difficult to control. Quite difficult to master. Hinokagutsuchi had said so before, but for now, at least they used it effectively...

Hal called out the magic gun.

Its form had changed. Previously a 9mm semi-automatic handgun in appearance, the gun's body was now fitted with a fifteen-centimeter-long bayonet under it.

This was a temporary form for controlling the runes of the Bow and the Twin Katana simultaneously.

However, the enemy that the magic gun ought to be pointing at had already—At that moment, Hal gasped. Ten-odd meters ahead, the gray dragon's head still remained and unscathed to boot.

Opening his jaws wide, he spewed out three long and thick chains.

Kuohhhhhhhhhh!

Two of the chains first wrapped around Akuro-Ou once,

immobilizing her.

"Deploy protection!" Hal instantly ordered the magic gun.

The pearly light enveloped him and included Orihime and Luna as well.

The imperishable protection knocked away the third chain in the nick of time, but like a living serpent without a moment's pause in its movements, it wrapped itself tightly around the shield of the indestructible barrier.

The gigantic chain, big enough to ensnare even dragons, wrapped around layer after layer before finally stopping. However, Hal saw the Ruruk Soun script manifested before them.

The meaning was "O jailer of heavenly imprisonment and chain of the executioner, accomplish your first mission."

If he were to release the imperishable protection, the three of them would be crushed by the chains in the end.

"If that's the case!"

Hal pointed the bayoneted magic gun at the gigantic chain in front of him.

Then he used fully automatic fire. A technique of assured annihilation. The bullets depleted earlier had been replenished. All thirty bullets in the magazine were fired as dragonslaying shots.

However, this merely left behind scratches on the chains of punishment.

"The gray dragon is still alive!?"

"I cannot believe that he still hasn't gone to hell yet. Truly living up to the name of a ghost that has evaded death..."

"—Nay. My path of conquest has been foiled and I shall be set along the path to the underworld again. O Tyrannos of the Bow, it is a shame but you lot have won."

This was his reply to Orihime's surprise and Luna's sharp tongue.

The voice of the Gray Aristocrat came from the dragon head.

"As a gesture of respect for your prowess, I leave behind two parting gifts. The first is my final mystic technique—the dragonslaying chain that had captured a thousand dragons in the past."

The Gray Aristocrat's whispering was very quiet.

Perhaps he was already satisfied that he was able to go on a rampage as a ghost even after death. However, in addition to final words, he was also issuing them a challenge.

"The other is a grave to bury you lot. You shall die together with me in this castle."

"...Huh?"

Hal was speechless. He soon noticed.

The cardiac chamber surrounding them—the walls, ceiling and floor inside the Dragon Palace Court's body had turned white at some point and even turned to stone. The Dragon Palace Court had died too.

Because its heartmetal had been smashed together with the Gray Aristocrat's body—On further thought, this was only logical.

However, there were five large runes of Ruruk Soun carved on the ceiling that had turned into stone.

"...Symbols for Heat and Explosion? Don't tell me he's gonna blow us up together with the Dragon Palace Court!? He's using this kind of technique of assured annihilation to trap us, preventing us from escaping!"

"Yes. Tyrannos of the Bow, your wits are not bad."

"Getting this type of answer correct isn't going to make me happy!"

The cardiac chamber's floor suddenly began to shake like an earthquake.

Every now and then, there were noises like impacts were colliding upwards from below. Apart from that, low explosion sounds kept coming from afar...

The Dragon Palace Court's explosion and collapse was happening at a frightening rate, no mistake about that.

"This castle will not last much longer. If you have no wish to die together with me, try your hardest to slice through my chain. Farewell."

These were the true last words of the ghost, the Gray Aristocrat.

All of the magic that had resided in the gray dragon's head so far vanished. The former gray dragon king finally welcomed death a second time.

However, the three chains coming out of the gray dragon head were still intact.

The chains continued to bind the light of protection guarding Hal and the two girls as well as Akuro-Ou. Imprisonment from the technique of assured annihilation had not eased up at all!

"Glinda cannot fight anymore while Harry's trump card didn't work..."

Forcing her exhausted body and mind to move, Luna Francois murmured to herself. She leaned her unsteady body against Hal and said in a feeble voice, "In other words... Akuro-Ou is the only one we can rely on..."

"In a way, I think there's still a trump card that can be used in this situation..."

"In that case, there is no time to deliberate!"

Listening to Hal and Luna's murmurs, Orihime declared firmly.

Despite her inexperience, Orihime was a courageous and decisive girl. She turned the cross-shaped emblem manifesting on the back of her left hand—the Rune of the Twin Katana—towards her partner.

The white fox-wolf was also bound by two chains.

She had contorted her body many times, trying to struggle out of the chains but to no avail.

"Akuro-Ou! Prepare to use the katana rune for a finishing move!"

The covenant's bond had probably informed Orihime how to use the rune.

To help his classmate, who was issuing orders decisively, Hal also entrusted the greatest power to her.

"Use the queen's power as well, go all-out!"

Kuohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!

Akuro-Ou roared loudly in response. The ruby armor suddenly appeared, equipped on the white fox-wolf's back and flanks. The armor on her back even had metallic arms with ruby coloring.

Two *arms*, resembling robotic arms for industrial applications. A right arm and a left arm.

The two arms on Akuro-Ou's back each wielded a dragonslaying katana. The two blades were spread to the left and right like a pair of wings. This was Akuro-Ou's dual wielding.

However, the dragonslaying chains were still restraining the fox-wolf and the twin katana—

"First sever the chains then attack that dragon head!"

In spite of the situation, Orihime still commanded. Akuro-Ou growled ferociously.

Orihime immediately motioned to Hal with her eyes, blushing as though trying to convey something difficult to bring up. Orihime's intent was very clear.

What was needed next was a technique of assured annihilation rivaling the sun-shooting divine bow.

Orihime on her own was unable to produce the necessary magical power for a technique of assured annihilation. Hal instantly nodded. Orihime glanced at Luna and hesitated for an instant, but even so, she still committed her determination and hugged Hal—

"Counting on you, Juujouji!"

"Yes, leave it to me!"

Jumping into Hal's embrace from the front, Orihime pressed her voluptuous bust against him.

Naturally, it was pressed against Hal's chest—the heart. The Crimson Queen's heartmetal! Instantly, his heart released magical

power in extraordinary quantity, delivering it into Orihime's heart.

"Nn—nnnnnn!"

Painful panting and what sounded like a sweet voice escaped from Orihime's lips.

In this manner, Hal's magical power was transmitted to Akuro-Ou through Orihime's heart. The white fox-wolf's savage countenance suddenly calmed down while her entire body was enveloped in golden radiance.

The two chains binding Akuro-Ou gradually disintegrated under the light. This was an exorcism technique, an evil-dispelling light of righteousness for blessing sacred beasts.

Nineteen runes of Ruruk Soun were shining over Akuro-Ou's head, signifying "I summon the twin blades of exorcism, to deliver seraphic punishment to nefarious evil dragons."

Using this arrangement of runes, Akuro-Ou regained her freedom then—

"W-Why aren't you moving, Akuro-Ou!?"

Hugging Hal, Orihime was very distraught.

All she had to do was pounce and sever the chain surrounding Hal and the two girls, but Akuro-Ou only stared calmly at the Gray Aristocrat's remaining head without budging the slightest.

"...This won't work, Orihime-san. Akuro-Ou has currently become too similar to a deity."

Luna Francois walked over to Orihime's side and whispered suddenly.

Her physical energy should have been depleted to the point that she could not stand on her own. The blonde beauty leaned herself against Hal and hugged him like the Japanese girl, pressing their bodies tightly together.

"You have to draw out more of her murderous intent. The technique of assured annihilation needed next is the atrocious act of wielding a sacred and blessed divine blade for slaughter—Contradictory magic of this sort."

The Rune of the Twin Katana also surfaced on the back of Luna's left hand.

It was presumably the rune combined with her knowledge as a master-class witch that allowed her to comprehend the key to dual wielding. Like a priestess who had received a divine oracle, the blonde American girl spoke solemnly.

"Holy and evil, right and wrong, yin and yang, demonic and divine... Entrust opposing elements to the twin blades so as to produce an attack embodying the rivalry of complementary opposites. Since this magic requires such complexity in execution, perhaps it might be too challenging for a downright honest person like Orihime-san..."

"U-U-U-Umm, umm, Luna-san. I think your lesson was very informative!"

Orihime hugged Hal tighter, pressing her ostensibly F-cup bust against him.

Always lively and cheerful, she was casting a gaze of confusion and reproach at Luna Francois who was up close. Her tone sounded quite displeased too.

"B-But why are you doing something like this to Haruga-kun!?"

Next to Orihime, Luna Francois was leaning against Hal with her bust that was even bigger than the glamorous Japanese girl's. Due to putting all her weight on Hal, the ostensibly G-cup bust was also pressed on Hal's chest...

Seeing her like that, Orihime was shocked. Luna simply said, "Simply stated, my reason is the same as yours, Orihime-san. Hey Harry, link up your heart and the rune with my heart and synchronize with my magical nature, then transmit it to Orihime-san and Akuro-Ou..."

"I get it now. That might very well work."

"Haruga-kun too, don't make weird expressions in this kind of situation!"

Two bosoms with astounding volume and elasticity were pressed against Hal—

Tightly pressed against him. Tightly pressed against him. Tightly pressed against him. Tightly pressed against him. Moved almost to tears, Hal found it difficult to calm down instead. Were he to allow his emotions to explode, he might very well faint from excessive joy.

Hence, he turned his mind into an immovable rock. It was time to be a sage who could think calmly no matter what the situation.

Perhaps this could be considered an expression of survival instinct. Meanwhile, Orihime asked in shock, "Besides, this method was supposed to be the secret belonging to us only! Why does Luna-san know about it!?"

"Sorry, many things happened when Harry and I established our covenant. However, it was thanks to Harry and I putting this method into action that I was able to reduce energy consumption. So please forgive me, okay?"



"H-Haruga-kun! Last time, you said you would exercise greater prudence with other girls—Ah...!"

"Mmm... Accept my feelings, Harry..."

"Enough! You keep glossing over the issue using this kind of method—Mmmmmmm!"

Luna whispered with an expression of ecstasy while Orihime glared at Hal while blushing intensely.

The two girls were tightly pressed on Hal, squeezing themselves against him as though competing to see whose body felt more

wonderful. What a surprising stroke of fortune. Who knew if something like this would happen even once in a lifetime?

In addition, Hal sensed it as the mediator between the two girls.

The heart of the brilliant strategist—Luna Francois—and Orihime's heart that was ablaze with anger and fighting spirit were swiftly synchronizing by using Haruga Haruomi as the medium—

Murderous intent and savagery returned to Akuro-Ou's face and she roared loudly.

Thus, she instantly attacked the Gray Aristocrat's head. The white fox-wolf's entire body was enveloped in golden light. Her countenance and movements were brimming with feral sharpness.

Then the twin katana on her back glowed golden as well—

Akuro-Ou used the right katana for a horizontal slash, then chopped vertically down with the left katana. The twin katana traced out a mark on the gray dragon's head in the form of a cross-shaped scar.

Thus, the Gray Aristocrat's legacy was destroyed.

The dragonslaying chain trapping Hal and the girls gradually crumbled into dust—

The Dragon Palace Court was a super creature reaching a kilometer in body length.

However, with its heartmetal already destroyed, it was reaching the end of its life.

Until earlier, despite its slow movements, the Dragon Palace Court was still swimming leisurely in the vast ocean. Now, its gigantic body had turned into a unmoving corpse. Rendered completely white in color, it had turned to stone.

The entity formerly the Dragon Palace Court slowly sank deep into the ocean.

However, one beast escaped from inside its body.

It was Akuro-Ou. The white nine-tailed fox-wolf. Akuro-Ou had deactivated Queen Form and returned to her normal appearance.

She escaped from the gradually sinking Dragon Palace Court to float up to the sea surface. The fox-wolf's snout was pushing a small pearly sphere, roughly two meters in diameter.

Akuro-Ou carefully pushed the sphere up with her snout as though handling treasure.

A minute or two later...

The gradually sinking Dragon Palace Court suddenly exploded, blown up into smithereens.

Akuro-Ou had escaped in the nick of time, pushing the pearly sphere to swim towards the sea surface.

However, when the sea surface was still some distance away, Akuro-Ou suddenly vanished. This was because her partner's energy had been depleted too fiercely, making it impossible to keep her materialized.

Now that the giant beast pushing it upwards until now had vanished, the pearly sphere began to sink.

However, something caught it.

It was the serpentine dragon leviathan, Minadzuki. She reached out with her forelimb to grab the sphere.

The wyvern leviathan, Rushalka, also appeared in the water, staring at the pearly sphere uneasily. Of course, the sphere was imperishable protection.

Even when sunk into the sea, it remained an indestructible sanctuary to protect the people inside.

This protection became Hal, Orihime and Luna Francois' lifeline. Using her forelimb to support the imperishable protection, Minadzuki began to swim to the sea surface—

Epilogue

"We are so damn lucky..."

"When Akuro-Ou disappeared, I thought we were going to sink to the bottom of the sea..."

"It'll definitely be impossible to find us even if they used a rescue boat for deep sea searches... I wonder how long can Harry's protection last...?"

"Even if I could sustain the protection, it's very likely we'll die of hunger inside it..."

Hal, Orihime and Luna Francois were finally rescued.

The commotion had continued all the way from last night and they even had to fight the Gray Aristocrat and escape the Dragon Palace Court in desperation.

Utterly exhausted in physical strength, mental energy and magical power. Due to excessive fatigue and the sense of relief, the three survivors collapsed sitting on the floor with their backs against the wall after their difficult ordeal.

Sitting in lethargy, the trio looked up at the blue summer sky.

A gust of warm sea breeze blew. It felt very comfortable. The long night had ended to welcome morning at last. It felt like it was going to be a hot day today too.

Also, their current location was the deck of the JMSDF multi-purpose support vessel.

The trio was leaning against the spire-like bridge protruding from the deck.

—Surrounded by imperishable protection, Hal and company had drifted in the sea.

Minadzuki was the one who had fished them out. She had hurried over together with Rushalka, probably by using a leviathan's keen senses, the covenant bond and investigative magic.

Surfacing from the sea, Minadzuki had put down the trio here.

Asya, Hazumi and the crew were probably going to rush over soon

"Anyway, let's take a break before they arrive..." This was the privilege belonging to the mentally and physically drained—Hal suggested lazily.

Luna and Orihime had no objections. They were all thoroughly exhausted. Even now, none of them wanted to stand up.

"B-By the way, you two, about just earlier, umm..." Orihime suddenly spoke quietly, her voice lowered in embarrassment.

Perhaps she was referring to the scene where the three of them had combined their power to sever the Gray Aristocrat's chains. As soon as he thought back to that time, Hal felt so touched that he almost had a breakdown.

Stemming from survival instincts after all, he naturally summoned his immovable rock-like state of mind.

"I-I think it would be best to keep it a secret from Hazumi and Asya-san. What do you two think? Since this is a matter between friends, would it be better to report to everyone after all...?"

"There shouldn't be a need to tell them expressly. I concur with Orihime-san," answered Luna Francois immediately.

There was still a blush on the blonde beauty's pale complexion. The aftertaste of the excitement back then had apparently lingered. With this expression, Luna winked profoundly at Orihime.

It was as though they were accomplices who had tasted forbidden fruit and wanted to keep it a secret between themselves.

Hence, Orihime nodded.

The black-haired Japanese maiden was clearly relieved.

"Th-Thank you, Luna-san. Thank you for saying that..."

"I believe that it would be too shocking for Asya and Hazumi-san... Shouldn't we keep this as a secret between us and Harry...?"

"Shocking—Well said. It is too shocking indeed!"

"Consequently, regarding the progress in my relationship with Harry, please turn a blind eye with a generous heart, Orihime-san. Let us compete with open fairness on this front, okay? We could join forces to inconspicuously keep Asya and Hazumi-san away from the front lines..."

"Huh? Oh, uh, I—well, how should I say this...?"

"It is imperative to limit those who engage in such behavior with Harry and experience those feelings to the two of us."

"By the way—"

Having entered sage time via a mind like an immovable rock, Hal suddenly interjected.

"What exactly did you two feel when we were doing that?"

"...Not telling."

The two girls, one Japanese and one American, answered in unison.

At that moment, they heard a patter of rapid footsteps. Someone was coming.

"Haruomi! Orihime-san and Luna have returned safely too!"

"I am so glad that everyone is safe and sound!"

Asya and Hazumi finally came. Hal went "hmm?" as though something occurred to him.

Speaking of which, Hal seemed to recall the same kind of scene taking place after the battle against Pavel Galad too. Hal felt a sense of foreboding but before he could explore the reason—

"H-H-H-H-H-Haruomi! What kind of craziness did you guys just do to end up like that!?"

"N-Nee-sama!? Senpai!? Even Luna-san!? U-Umm, all of you look very tired! E-Excuse me!"

"H-Hazumi!? Wait, don't go, listen to my explanation!"

Seeing the rescued trio in this state, Asya first flew into a rage.

Then the kindhearted Hazumi was rendered flustered, confused and

distraught. Finally, she turned around and was about to make a quick exit. When her cousin, Orihime, called to her, Hazumi halted.

At that moment, Hal finally became aware of their current state.

Due to excessive fatigue, the trio of Hal, Orihime and Luna Francois were leaning against the bridge with their limbs outstretched. This was not a problem so far.

However, the way they were sitting was the so-called "III" configuration.

In the middle was Haruga Haruomi. On his right was Luna Francois with Orihime on his left. As though sharing a bed with Hal, the two girls were pressed tightly against him.

Indeed. Hal was currently sandwiched between two girls with spectacular figures.

Luna Francois was using her leg to entangle Hal's leg. Orihime's black hair and exquisite face was positioned close to Hal's cheek, a level of intimacy beyond normal. However, the trio did not mean anything by it. They had simply entered this state without noticing.

This was because they had naturally squeezed themselves together inside the imperishable protection's cramped interior during the escape from the Dragon Palace Court.

Furthermore, the excitement from using the Rune of the Twin Katana was still lingering in the trio's hearts.

That was probably the reason why Hal and the girls accepted this state without thinking there was anything wrong. However, it was true that this posture would make others think that they had some sort of suspicious relationship or had crossed the line in a male-female sense...

Just as Hal was thinking if he could find some kind of eloquent excuse—

Luna Francois suddenly drew her face near. By the time he came to his senses, Luna had already sealed his mouth with her lips. Hal was being kissed. By Luna's lips.

"Huh—?"

The raging Asya froze. At a loss how to react, Hazumi also stared wide-eyed, unmoving.

Resting against Hal, Orihime jumped all at once.

Unconcerned about the audience's gaze, Luna Francois continued to kiss Hal. Her well-shaped lips had sealed Hal's mouth—and she even inserted her tongue. Pecking, licking Hal's lips, she then entangled Hal's tongue with her own, kissing him nonstop with audible smooches.

In the end, after a passionate kiss lasting roughly forty seconds, Luna finally moved her lips away.

"In other words, this is what's going on. Best regards to you, Asya."

Hal's childhood friend lose composure and showed a very flustered gaze.

As a side note, Hal himself was in a dazed state. This was completely out of left field for him.

Half a day went by after Hal's reunion with Asya and the others.

Hal and company returned to Shimoda at the Izu Peninsula with the intention of returning to Tokyo New Town the next day after spending a night there. Night had fallen. The sky was cloudless, allowing a clear view of the stars.

Feeling very uncomfortable inside the inn, Hal went for a seaside stroll on his own.

This was because Luna Francois' behavior had shocked all the other members in the group.

Orihime and Hazumi would suddenly lose their calm as soon as they were in Hal's presence, unable to speak.

Asya was probably the most shocked, remaining dazed for a many hours. However, after hearing Luna's invitation to Hal, "Harry, if you don't mind, how about coming to my room tonight?", Asya kept following Luna closely to prevent the blonde Shootdown Ace from acting freely.

Furthermore, Luna's invitation felt like it was only partially in jest...

This made Hal recall his first experience with the sensation of lips. However, he hastily interrupted his reminiscence because he immediately realized he would act very strangely if he continued.

He shook his head and looked up at the night sky.

On a whim, Hal began to look for the Cygnus. Cygnus was a cross-shaped summer constellation. According to Ruruk Soun's secret records, it was apparently the emblem of the twin katana cross star, the Rune of the Twin Katana—

Perhaps this knowledge was what prompted him to search for Cygnus.

"Has it been a fruitful journey, Haruomi?" The voice of the white dragon king and princess inquired.

Hal immediately answered, "So-so. At least the gains were not zero."

"Good for you. I was right to *send you out*."

Princess Yukikaze nodded with satisfaction. Before he knew it, she was already standing in front of Hal—No.

Only seconds earlier did she descend gallantly from the sky without making a sound. Hal was not surprised by this, because the Rune of the Bow had already told him that the arrow paired with it was approaching.

Hal shrugged. Coming and going elusively unseen was not a suitable description for her.

Given Princess Yukikaze's flying ability that was like an arrow's, the distance from Tokyo to Izu would be like the distance of an evening stroll.

"Did something happen in Tokyo afterwards?"

"Nothing. You can call it daily peace. Yes."

Princess Yukikaze curled the corners of her lips and smiled mischievously.

"I am not clairvoyant. Perhaps there are subjects shedding tears where I, Yukikaze, cannot see, but it should be fine to exclude them, right? Hmm."

"On the other hand, I wish you'd look after every single subject like a benevolent queen."

"What are you talking about? How every family lives and spends their days has nothing to do with the sovereign. Do you want where you sleep and what you eat to be determined by royal decree?"

"I see what you mean. You definitely make a good point."

"A sovereign's job is to revitalize the nation, build a capital and rule well. But in the case of dragon kings, this should be changed to compete, fight and plunder."

Princess Yukikaze smiled again. She was bringing up a king's insight.

It looked like Princess Yukikaze only sought out Hal to chat tonight, even though she was regarding Haruga Haruomi as her current foe of sorts.

But it was also in Princess Yukikaze's style to show open-mindedness without getting bogged down by such matters.

Hal accepted it wryly. He had his reasons that made it impossible for him to complain to Princess Yukikaze.

"Then in the near future, I'll pay you a visit and bring *a souvenir* from my travels as thanks."

"Yes, please do. Just go to the same wedge as before and signal as appropriate. I, Yukikaze, will head over as soon as I notice."

A few days before the expedition to Izu, Luna Francois had invited Hal on a date.

However, Hal had told her "unfortunately, I have a date with someone else today." This was no excuse. In fact, Hal had gone to the Old Tokyo Concession alone after school that day.

It was to have an audience with Princess Yukikaze.

Although the distance was not great, all of New Town's witches were going to take part in the expedition.

Prior to the journey, he wanted to observe whether the princess was in a good mood or not, to confirm whether she intended to start a conflict within these few days. Apart from that, Hal wanted to

confirm with Princess Yukikaze whether she would fight and drive off other dragons if they attacked while Hal and company were away—

Such a discussion was very shameless, but Hal felt that the princess, with her strong curiosity, would agree to it.

Hence, Hal had visited the Monolith standing in a corner of what was formerly Ginza. On that day, the girl who was like a snow fairy had also descended from the sky like a gust of wind...

"One more thing, Haruomi. I, Yukikaze, shall make this clear in advance. No need for souvenirs."

"Really?"

"Yes. The twin katana in your hands are enough. Fufu, you are gradually obtaining power worthy enough for me, Yukikaze, to take matters into my own hands. Let me offer you a few words of commendation."

"I went through so much to get a new weapon and you've already seen through it? You leave me speechless."

"Solving riddles isn't my forte. The one who is curious might be that man over there."

Princess Yukikaze threw a glance behind Hal.

Hal looked back. Although it was a stuffy summer night, the man was wearing a summer suit with full formality, waiting there silently. The man's face was both mature and proper.

As a side note, he was not sweating the slightest. With a cool expression, the man stood there without moving from his spot.

"It has been a while, young man. Successor of the Bow and Twin Katana."

His voice sounded as astringent as rusted iron.

Indeterminate birthplace. Tall. A man in his prime in appearance. Named Sophocles. In charge of facilitating the Road to Kingship—

"Actually, I have suspected this since a long time ago. Was it the Crimson Queen who had hid away the seal of the twin katana? I am very happy to obtain the answer to this question."

"You came all the way to Izu just to say this?"

Hal shrugged. Sophocles had claimed to be a human, not a dragon.

This man. The flint. The history of the race called "dragons." There seemed to be an endless number of mysteries to take care of—Hal really wanted to complain. Also, his guide, Hinokagutsuchi, had thoroughly entered a state of lethargy right now.

The corners of Sophocles' lips rose slightly.

"Distance and location are irrelevant. So long as it is to see you, Tyrannos and dragon king, I am willing to venture anywhere, not just on Earth but even the far ends of the sea of stars. And young man, you would do best to remember one thing."

"What is it?"

"The former queen is not the only one who can instruct you. I can fulfill that job too."

"Now that you bring it up, I think you mentioned it before as well. Anyway, I'll keep that in mind."

Hal gave a safe answer, but what he was thinking was—

It was probably because Sophocles was always dressed in black. This man could very well be a devil surpassing Hinokagutsuchi in truth—Hal found himself unable to evict this image and bias from his mind.

Currently, there was absolutely no reason compelling him to abandon this bias.

Hence, Hal did not say more and Sophocles departed silently. By the time he noticed, Princess Yukikaze had vanished too.

Summer had just started. Only a couple months had gone by since he had obtained the power of dragonbane.

Nevertheless, the seeds of chaos were slowly and steadily growing in Hal's surroundings.

Afterword

Hello again, everyone, I am Takedzuki Jou.

This series has already reached its fourth volume, a tale that could be called the starting point of the second arc.

Although there is a slight mismatch between the release date and the actual season, this fourth volume was inspired by lighthearted plot along the likes of "The beach! Swimsuits!"

However, sigh, as is always the case, this volume's theme goes beyond that (wry smile).

Tokyo New Town and Old Tokyo's wasteland can be thought of as a type of dungeon, but different from the "miniature garden"-like plot progression in the first three volumes, Volume 4's developments take place outside of New Town.

Using the map called the sea as the stage, I've also added elements of wilderness adventure.

As for the swimsuit part, it would be great if everyone had fun with it.

Next up, let's talk about something else.

I am not someone who frequently browses the publisher's website.

That being said, I still have occasional whims of "let's take a look once in a while" for webpages about my works.

As a result, I discovered unexpected news when browsing through various sites.

(Huh?)

(2013 MF Bunko J Summer School Festival's student council president character...)

(This is clearly an event that's supposed to elect a character by popular vote to become the president...)

(Why is this person ranked fifth?)

(That's so weird. I'm catching a whiff of a biased election...)

These troubled thoughts stirred in my mind.

To think that a character had appeared when they shouldn't, this stimulated my little gray cells, causing me to associate that person with the possibility of committing a crime—

"What kind of rude thoughts are you entertaining!?"

Hi A●●a-san. It's been a while since we last met in Volume 3.

"I can't stand this... To have characters from the story appear in the afterwords, could you please rein in such behavior since it's not like this is a nineties-era novel."

Oh my oh my, don't say it like that. How should I put it? Although I've written dozens of characters so far, you are particularly special, A●●a-san.

"Huh!?"

I suppose I should say that not only do I want to write you in my stories, but I even want to converse with you directly.

"Well... (blush) My heart already belongs to someone else... Well, but it's not like I can't accept it if it doesn't extend beyond feelings of affection, if that's the case—"

After all, it's President M's job to make critical remarks about you.

But occasionally, I'd like to make witty comments myself without relying on characters' voices.

"...So the result is this kind of messy mix of personal affairs with official business? (glare)"

Apart from that, you can also say it's because I'm in a dilemma, not knowing what to write for the afterword.

"Did you just reveal your true thoughts accidentally...? Sigh, whatever. Let's just put that aside and get on with the main point. Due to receiving votes from fans, I was ranked fifth in the student council election, what's so strange about that!?"

It's definitely very strange, A●●a-san.

Because this isn't a "general election to decide our fireteam leader in the marines."

The main point was to nominate twenty characters from among MF Bunko J's series to then select a candidate suitable for serving as a student council president.

"I obtained the excellent result of fifth ranked because the readers recognize my outstanding leadership and charisma. Teehee."

On the other hand, I think given your character traits, you're suited to being a fireteam leader in the army or the marines than serving as a student council president.

So, could it be that you obtained votes through illegal means...?

"As if I'd do something like that!"

No use of bribery or threats to manipulate the number of votes?

In that case, I'm sure it's the power of Nimura-san's illustration on the voting poster.

"Why can't you honestly admit that it's because of my personal charm...? Then forgive me for asking this, who among the nominated characters do you think is suitable to be the president?"

Oh?

"Considering various areas including moral character, experience, ideology, special skills, personal relationships, etc, the right candidate for the job is obvious. That's right, indeed, only I—"

Oh, I think Kawaguchi-sensei's Elen-san would be quite suitable.

"I-I can't believe I have a traitor in our midst!"

Back to the main point...

What's mentioned above is the 2013 MF Bunko J Summer Student Council President voting event.

I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to all the readers for supporting her to obtain quite good results as the

representative of this series.

Also, within this Volume 4, I used the title of *Onii-chan Dakedo Ai Sae Areba Kankeinai yo ne* in a little shout-out.

Many thanks to Suzuki Daisuke-sensei who had given permission readily.

Of course, I still have to express my deep gratitude to everyone laboring diligently on various jobs from editing to sales, etc, as well as Nimura-sama for providing beautiful illustrations as always.

Next is about developments from here on.

That character who had made a brief appearance might enter the stage again.

The young man, the beautiful maiden and the somber characters in the enemy roster have shown up one after another. It's time for the "daring and uninhibited older man" character to enter the fray, right?

In addition, who is going to become the featured heroine?

Luna Francois has officially joined the competition. What effects will this bring to the love comedy?

The gradually maturing protagonist has obtained additional combat strength and the new skill of sage time. In what directions would these assets guide his adventures and the conflicts between characters?

If possible, it would be my honor if all of you could confirm the answers to these questions in Volume 5.

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